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Visitors to Oxford might be forgiven for wondering where they've stumbled

into when they see a No. 17 bus with Jericho on the destination board.

As those of us who live here know, it's a rather trendy and expensive part of Oxford to live in.

Although, when my Dad was born and brought up there in the 1920's - 30's, it was teetering on being a slum.

Apart from that, the more famous Jericho was, and is, a city in the Holy Land that Joshua conquered by breaching its walls with blasts from rams horns trumpets.

In those biblical epics that Hollywood used to churn out, it was always shown as poor, dusty, and run-down.

Certainly not the case when Jesus walked this earth, and visited the city.

King Herod, and his son Archelaus, loved everything Roman, so they built and embellished Jericho in the Roman Imperial style.

It was a veritable Shangri-La of fine palaces, gardens, pools, baths, and public buildings.

With its good climate, Jericho became the favourite chilling-out place for the elite, and the equivalent of the A-list celebs. of that time.

The sort of Beverly Hills or Bel-Air of its day.

As with all places where the 'beautiful people' congregate, it had its dark underbelly too. The poor, the dispossessed, and the disabled.

Because Jericho was the last stopping-off point for pilgrims before they began the steep 22 mile walk to Jerusalem, the poor, dispossessed, and disabled were found in abundance, trying to eke out an existence from the pilgrim's charity.

With no welfare state, no health insurance; and the attitude that those who were disabled in any way must have sinned, and so were suffering the consequences of their sin - or indeed the sin of some long-dead ancestor - begging was the only option to starvation, and death.

You'll no doubt have noticed, as I have, that the Big Issue sellers in Oxford have their own jealously guarded sales pitches.

Just like Bartimaeus: although they are rich compared to his poverty in his society.

All he has is his cloak, which served as cover to protect against the heat and the cold, his blanket at night, and something to catch the coins tossed at him by complacent passers-by.

What a fall from grace. For, as Mark pointedly tells us, Bartimaeus is the son of Timaeus, which means 'the honoured one.'

What story, I wonder, lies behind his descent from being Timaeus's son, to lying in dirt, deprivation, and dust?

One could almost say the dust of death; because Bartimaeus's condition was a living - no, not a living - an existing death.

And that's the key to the story. It's not simply about Jesus curing a man of his blindness.

At its core, Mark is showing us the transformation that is ours if we believe in Jesus who went down into the dust of death Himself, and rose from the dead to give us the gift of eternal life.

In Mark's Gospel Jesus predicts His Death and Resurrection three times.

Before the first of these 'prophecies' He heals a blind man; and now, after the third and last, He heals Bartimaeus of his blindness.

So Mark links our fallen human condition of spiritual blindness - 'modelled' as it were by physical blindness - only being cured through following Jesus to the Cross, and out into the Resurrection Light through the open entrance of His Empty Tomb.

Very often, and it's certainly true of me, we really only take notice of Jesus when we want something, or if we hit a crisis in our lives.

Then we start asking him for the things we think we desperately need.

Very, very rarely do we feel the absolute need for Him that Bartimaeus felt when He realised Jesus was a few feet away from him.

Bartimaeus, although he's blind, actually sees Jesus with the absolute clarity that his sighted Disciples don't have.

Last week you'll recall that James and John, two of Jesus' closest Disciples, ask Him to let them sit at His right and His left in glory when He reigns in Jerusalem as an earthly king.

They've heard everything He's said about His suffering, and death, and rising again simply as words without meaning, and can't see that His Kingdom is not of that kind at all.

So Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus: 'Son of David.'

What's in a name, you might ask?

Well, 'Son of David' means you are the Messiah, the Saviour, the descendant of King David promised for centuries by the Prophets.

Then Bartimaeus goes on to ask the Son of David for mercy: and mercy, in the sense that Bartimaeus wants and needs it, can only be given by the One True God.

So, in one short phrase, this blind man has seen that Jesus is the Saviour, and is God in the flesh.

Would that I had that sort of faith...

Although the sceptics, and those who only want to see Jesus because He's become famous, and those who want something from Him, try to shut Bartimaeus up, he's insistent.

And his persistence pays off because Jesus calls Bartimaeus to Him, and heals him.

Then Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way - the way that will lead to death on the Cross in Jerusalem.

Mark, in making this point, wants to leave us in no doubt that to follow Jesus will lead to the Cross for each one of us - and the Cross will be unique to each of us.

But Mark doesn't let it end there; because he's shown us through the 'parable' of Bartimaeus that out of death comes the Resurrection to eternal life.

Bartimaeus had carved out a patch of ground that he inhabited where he felt safe - or at least as safe as anyone can in this uncertain world.

But when Jesus came by he was willing to forsake that, and follow Him wherever He called Bartimaeus to go.

Contrast that with the Rich Young Man we met a couple of weeks ago in the Gospel.

He had everything the world could offer, yet couldn't give up the one thing that Jesus asked him to leave behind to gain eternal life now, and forever.

The Young Man couldn't do it, so: "At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions." Mk. 10: 22

Paradoxically, Bartimaeus is in the same place as the Rich Young Man; although Bartimaeus has nothing in worldly terms.

Bartimaeus has his patch of ground, the Young Man his possessions; both of which are a sort of security blanket for these two men.

Each one of us will have in our lives, or may have already had, a call from Jesus to give up our particular security blanket, and to take up our cross, and follow Him.

If we follow Him we'll gain freedom, joy, and salvation: and we'll cast aside our spiritual blindness, just as Bartimaeus cast aside his old rag of a cloak.

“Throwing his cloak aside, [Bartimaeus] jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘I want to see.’ ‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’

Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.”

Mk. 10: 50 - 52

May we do the same when Jesus calls us.