

In the name of God, creating, redeeming, sanctifying, ... Amen.

“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” So says the opening sentence from scripture for our Eucharist as we gather for this Anglicare Australia Conference in Adelaide.

We are gathered this evening to hear God’s call to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God in our work as people of Anglicare Australia. We are here to wonder about our work and how it is that we might find an interweaving of courage and kindness in this work. The opening sentence for this service exhorts us to know that God is with us as we do that. But what does this God look like? What does this promise of God’s presence tell us? And how will this promise inspire us as we embark on these days of conference together?

What does this God look like? Often the scriptures show us God in a story. And for us, some of the most profound stories are found in the gospels. We see God in Jesus and in Jesus’ interactions with those who call to him.

*As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd are leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, is sitting by the roadside. When he hears that it is Jesus of Nazareth, he begins to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’*  
(Mark 10:46-7)

“What do you want me to do for you?” Says Jesus who is the image of God, this God whose presence we are promised will be with us wherever we go, in response to Bartemaeus’ cry.

In this, our gospel reading tonight from the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark's Gospel, some fascinating things happen. Firstly, the blind man, Bartimaeus, cries out, and, when he is told by the disciples not to bother Jesus, he cries out again. In the scriptures there are several key themes – God themes. And one of these is the theme of exodus. In the story of the Exodus, God freed the people of Israel who were in slavery in Egypt. And God acted to free God's people *in response to their cry*. In a sense every healing is an *exodus* story. Bartimaeus comes to Jesus *enslaved* by his blindness. In every story of Jesus' healing we find a cry. It may be the cry of the one who is in need of healing, as in the case of Blind Bartimaeus; it may be the cry or the prayer of one who loves them. Every healing is in response to a cry. Somehow what God needs to heal is an expression of the truth. The truth of the pain of the illness whatever it may be, for Bartimaeus the truth of the pain of blindness and the diminished life that this blindness gives.

The next aspect of the story of the healing of Blind Bartimaeus that is worth of our consideration is the strangeness of Jesus' response. *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Jesus says to this blind man. This seems an extraordinary question. Jesus, who has deep insight into the needs of those with whom he keeps company, surely knows what this man needs. What integrity Jesus gives this blind man when he asks *him* to name what it is he longs for. *Not only is his pain voiced but his heart's desire.* Everything comes from within the blind man. Jesus' presence just helps him to speak the truth. And so Jesus names the source of the healing as the man's own faith. *"Your faith has made you well."* *Immediately the man regained his sight and followed him on the way.* The statement of the man being made well happens *before* he gains his sight. It is as if the wellness is in the cry of the pain of blindness and the voicing of the desire for sight. For Jesus *that is what it is to be well.* The regaining of sight comes after.

Blind Bartameus cried and all Jesus seemed to need to heal was this cry. Only we know that not everyone with whom we come into contact, with whom Jesus came into contact, has the strength to make that cry. The work of Anglicare, the Godly work of all who are gathered here, is so often with those who are vulnerable, frail, outcast, homeless, the young whose parents cannot care for them, those who do not always have the strength to cry. The hymn we are about to sing expresses this very truth. That part of the work of our organisation is to be the voice of those in deepest need. One of the verses we will sing as our offertory expresses these needs in full knowledge that it through organisations like ours that these needs might be met.

*Shelter for fragile lives*

*Cures for their ills*

*Work for the craftsman*

*Trade for their skills*

*Land for the dispossessed*

*Rights for the weak*

*Voices to plead the cause*

*Of those who can't speak*

We are to be the voices to plead the causes of those who can't speak. In courage and gentleness. Not easy, that...

Remember, though, the promise ... the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. How are we to believe this, to know this presence, when faced with deep need day by day?

The work of Anglicare is often slow painstaking work, work that takes a long time, work whose completion we do not always see. For people aren't always healed are they? We pray and pray for the ones we love, for ourselves, for those with whom we work, and sometimes the restoration to a life of wholeness we long for doesn't seem to come. We find ourselves struggling with a debilitating disease, sometimes someone we love dearly dies. And sometimes injury, or even death, strike unexpectedly and we didn't even know we needed to pray, to struggle to trust, to keep those we work with safe. Sometimes the freedom we long for for those in our care seems always to evade them. Is Jesus out of compassion some days? Even if we cry out on behalf of others, isn't our faith enough? Isn't his promised presence as healer enough?

Our Gospel reading this evening comes from the Gospel of Mark. In the first half of this gospel story, we see Jesus announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God as he teaches and heals and sets people free from the negative things that have a hold on them, and it all seems like quite a success story really. But Jesus knows that this is not enough. Jesus knows that the redemption of creation – for that is what he is about – needs more. And so, in the story that was read in our churches this morning from the 8<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus embraces a different course. Jesus turns. He turns to face Jerusalem. Jesus tells his disciples that must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the religious leaders, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Jesus let's go of all his power, even his power to bring freedom to the people he encounters. He hands over his power and allows himself to become utterly vulnerable.

Paul, writing in a letter to the people of Philippi put it this way.

*Jesus emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.*

Jesus becomes the poor, do you see? Jesus becomes the one who is unfairly tried and mocked; Jesus becomes the one who is unjustly executed. Jesus becomes the outcast. Jesus endures the physical and emotional and spiritual pain of dying, just about alone. Jesus becomes the poor.

So the promise that God is with us as we seek to offer shelter for fragile lives and cure for the ills in the people entrusted to our care, as we stand in solidarity with those who are homeless, as we struggle to give integrity to those so many shun, this promise is a deep one. And the promise is held in the mystery of who God is. For not only is God with us as the healing life giving presence, but God is with us in Christ who gave up everything to be the poor. God's heart is particularly with the poor. Some theologians writing in South America speak, in fact, of God's preferential option for the poor.

Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go. For the one who hears our cries is with us. The one who offers us the integrity to name our healing is alongside us. The one who became poor and died a criminal's death that we might know God's love, stands alongside every human being that members of Anglicare Australia seek to serve.