

What will we ask Jesus to do for us?

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[0 : 00] Let's share our prayer together. Heavenly Father, we humbly bow in your presence.! May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher,! and your great glory, the supreme concern.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Once upon a time, in 1745, in fact, in Edinburgh, during the Jacobite Rising, Bonnie Prince Charlie did a strange thing.

At Holyrood Palace, in front of his courtiers, he had an audience with a little girl who was suffering from skin ulcers. As the girl knelt, the prince touched her sores and a priest prayed that she would be healed.

This ceremony was one of the last expressions, the very last on these shores, of an old medieval belief in the royal touch.

The idea that kings possessed the power to heal certain skin diseases. The Jacobite claimants to the throne continued to touch and supposedly cure people in exile as a way of proving that they were the true royal line.

[1 : 23] Hence, Bonnie Prince Charlie showing off his skills. Now, the ruling Hanoverian Georges were much too rational and much too German to keep up such a superstitious practice, and they replaced the touching ceremony with distributing money on Maundy Thursday before Easter.

And this still goes on, and in Durham Cathedral, in a couple of weeks' time, the king will give out the traditional Maundy money. J.R.R. Tolkien made a reference to this old belief in the third part of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Return of the King*, where Aragorn shows that he is the true heir of the throne of Gondor by healing the wounded after battle.

A wise woman says, the hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known. From Bonnie Prince Charlie to J.R.R. Tolkien, the hands of the king are the hands of a healer.

In our reading today, too, Jesus shows that the hands of the king are the hands of a healer. But unlike Aragorn or the Jacobites, he is not doing this to show that he is king, but to show what kind of king he is.

As he walks the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he is showing what kind of Messiah he is, what it means to be the Christ. He has just told his disciples, as we heard last week, that the proper model is not the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over their subjects.

[3 : 00] Instead, he has come not to be served, but to serve. And here, he has set an example of how to serve. He is not only showing that the hands of the king are the hands of a healer, but he is showing how those healing hands are kind hands, how they are not used to prove a right to rule in order to be served, but used in order to serve.

Matthew tells us, and as they went out of Jerusalem, a great crowd followed him. This is the last stage of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, a journey that he has repeatedly told his disciples is his mission to make, a mission that leads to the cross.

Back in Galilee, he began to tell his 12 disciples about his coming death and resurrection. And two chapters ago, at the beginning of chapter 19, he left Galilee and began to travel down the Jordan Valley.

And now he's reached Jericho, the point to turn away from following the Jordan River, and to turn west, up into the hills to the city of Jerusalem. And his disciples have followed him all the way from Galilee, and now are following him all the way to Jerusalem, all the way to Easter.

And it's not just the 12, but crowds of people following him, crowds following this teacher, this healer, this man who seems to be a king marching towards the capital city.

[4 : 37] Maybe these are people who have seen Jesus. Maybe these are people who have seen a throng of others gathering and have come along to see what's going on. What must they have been

thinking?

What have they picked up from Jesus, from the 12, from each other in the crowd? What were they expecting? Did they understand that this was Jesus' final journey?

Certainly, there would have been excitement, a sense of momentum, a feeling that events were building to a climax. They were reaching the end of their long journey.

The next chapter describes Jesus' triumphal entry to Jerusalem, where that expectation overflows into shouting and celebration, with the crowd spreading their cloaks and palm branches and singing.

Were they already getting ready for that celebration, for hailing Jesus as a king? Were they expecting some great political declaration in defiance of the occupying Roman Empire?

[5 : 51] Were they, like the choir this morning, already practicing what they would sing on Palm Sunday? But then we read, And behold, there were two blind men sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David.

Here are two people who aren't part of the crowd, who aren't following Jesus. Two blind men just sat by the side of the road as people go by.

Whereas crowds often gather because people see that something is happening, these men live in a world of sound rather than a world of sight.

Instead of seeing that people are crowding together, they hear it. They are used to working out what is going on around them from sounds, telling apart lone footsteps from groups, hearing snatches of conversation, listening as the noises of people passing by approach and get louder and then recede into the distance.

And from what they can hear, they realise that Jesus is passing by. And to attract his attention, they shout out, there's no point in trying to fight their way through the crowd to get to him.

[7 : 18] So they cry out, Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David. Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David. Son of David is a title that Matthew uses a lot for Jesus.

Right back at the beginning of his gospel, in chapter 1, verse 1, when he introduces Jesus' family tree, one of those list of names that we often tend to skip over, he calls it the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David.

Son of David is a royal title. It marks Jesus as a descendant of David. And it's a sign that the promises God makes to establish the throne of David forever, the promises that David's descendants will always rule in Jerusalem are going to be fulfilled in Jesus.

That's exactly the tale of two kings that we will be thinking about in our holiday club this week. Son of David is a title that promises the return of the king.

But the way the title is used in Matthew's gospel is always in connection with healing. In chapter 9, two other blind men call Jesus Son of David before he gives them sight.

[8 : 40] In chapter 12, a crowd wonders if Jesus can be the Son of David because he's healed a man who is mute and blind. And in chapter 15, a Canaanite woman calls Jesus the Son of David when asking for her daughter to be healed.

So when these blind men call Jesus Son of David, they are not only hailing him as a king, they're hailing him as a healer. They know that the hands of the king are the hands of a healer.

They know what kind of king Jesus is. They know that he is a king that has mercy and so they ask, have mercy on us, Son of David.

So often in Bible stories, stories that we read, and in hymns that we sing, blindness is used as a metaphor for ignorance, for not seeing who Jesus is.

How often have we sung, I once was blind but now I see. But here, the blind men know perfectly well who Jesus is.

[9 : 53] They don't need knowledge. They need help. They know that he is a healing Messiah. And it turns out that they know who Jesus is rather better than the crowds who are already following him.

The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent. But they cried out all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David. The crowd rebuked them.

These men were being noisy and disruptive, communicating through shouts and cries was how these blind men had adapted to being without sight.

But that was disorderly and distracting for the crowd. Maybe it was interrupting their choir practice. They wanted to get on with following Jesus all the way, to get on with going from Jericho to

Jerusalem.

It wasn't convenient to have to accommodate two blind men. It wasn't pleasant or comfortable to listen to these men trying to shout to someone that they couldn't even see.

[11 : 04] It would be much more convenient, much easier, if these men would just know their place by the roadside, if they would just keep silent.

The crowd doesn't think that they should be inconvenienced by these two men. After all, there's more of them. Why should they, the many, the able-bodied, the normal, have to put themselves at the service of just two people?

When have we preferred that someone in need keeps silent? When have we thought that an adaptation for someone disabled is getting in the way?

When have we wanted someone to just let us pass by? But the men didn't stop shouting. They refused to be silent.

And stopping, Jesus called to them and said, what do you want me to do for you? Jesus does two things here to show the crowd what kind of king he is.

[12 : 17] First, he stops. the two men are sat by the side of the road and Jesus stops to be with them. Instead of telling them to come walk with him, he comes to them.

Even though he is on his way to Jerusalem, even though he is in the final stages of his mission on earth, he takes time to stop and to be with these two blind men.

And then he asks, he asks, what do you want me to do for you? He doesn't assume that because they are blind, they must want to be able to see.

He doesn't project onto them what he thinks their needs are. He asks, what a great model of service that is.

What a great model of mission to come into another person's situation and ask. At New College, up on the mound, our cafe is run by an organisation called Coffee Saints, and they're very good.

[13 : 28] And they are part of a social enterprise run by the Grass Market Community Project. The Grass Market Community Project is a partnership that involves Greyfriars Kirk. And one of their guiding principles is asking people what they want and not assuming we know best.

And the scripture that they cite to support this is precisely Jesus asking, what do you want me to do for you? Asking people what they want and not assuming we know best.

a key slogan for the disability rights movement is no decision about us without us.

Disabled people, whether they are blind or deaf or use a wheelchair or have learning difficulties, are often reliant on assistance from others, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in large ways.

and so often it can be easy for those who give that assistance to be the ones that get asked to make decisions. Or worse, people can assume that they know best, that they already know what the person wants.

[14 : 49] They assume that because these men are blind, they must want to see. This girl has learning difficulties, so she must not be able to express preferences about what she wants.

We saw the consequences of that attitude during the COVID-19 pandemic, when do not resuscitate orders were placed in the records of disabled and elderly patients without consultation.

Jesus shows a different model of healing, a model that doesn't prefer like the crowd, that people in need would keep silent.

Jesus asks, what do you want me to do for you? And the men answer for themselves. They said to him, Lord, let our eyes be opened.

The blind theologian John Hull suggests that in the modern day the response would not be that, but would be, get me some computer training and a job with a firm that has a decent equal opportunities policy.

[16 : 03] In Jesus' time, the only way for the men to have dignity and independence, to be able to work to support themselves and their families, would be to be able to see. But these days, that independence and dignity can come from technological assistance and other accommodations.

how much a disability can be a drawback is something that changes over time. And this is something that I'm personally very aware of because I have a learning difficulty.

It's called dyspraxia, and it basically means that my balance and my physical coordination are very poor. And the main effect, apart from ruling out a tennis career, is in my handwriting.

My handwriting is very much a scrawl, at the best of times, and it deteriorates if I have to write for any length of time. And once, this would have been a major barrier to a university career or to the

ministry.

But because of the spread of computers over the last 30 years, it has really barely been an issue at all. I preach from a tablet or printed notes, but so do most of my colleagues.

[17:15] And in fact, because I do sometimes speak from very scrawled bullet points, then I think I probably used handwritten notes more than some ministers over the last year. So I'm very blessed to live in a time and a place that means my disability is very much not an issue for navigating areas of everyday life.

So this means that if Jesus were to ask a blind person or a deaf person or a disabled person what they wanted him to do for them, they might not respond in the way we think.

Certainly my dyspraxia wouldn't be top of my list. How would you respond if Jesus asked you, what do you want me to do for you?

Would you ask for something that someone would expect or would it be something that they found surprising and wouldn't tell from looking at you?

And Jesus in pity touched their eyes and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. The blind men were right that Jesus would have mercy.

[18:30] Here he is moved by pity by compassion. They were right about the kind of king that he is. Previously in Matthew when Jesus had been moved by pity or compassion it's been towards crowds.

The same word is used when he had compassion to the crowd that are like sheep without a shepherd and when feeding the 4,000 and the 5,000. compassion. But here instead of the crowd the same compassion is shown to two individuals even though the crowd around them wants to do anything but.

Jesus is not just moved by compassion for the many for humanity as a whole but his pity for each of us individually in our different needs and our particular situations.

Jesus touched their eyes. The blind men cut off from the world of sight have used sound to hear Jesus and to attract his attention.

And Jesus has stopped and come to them at the roadside and entered into their world of sound by speaking to them and listening to them. He's come into their situation.

[19:53] And now he comes to them in the other sense that the blind men use to perceive the world around them. In touch. He is shown in the most intimate way, in a way that the men can understand that the hands of the king are indeed the hands of a healer.

And once they recover their sight, the blind men join the crowd and follow Jesus. They too are now able to follow Jesus all the way.

But the men haven't just become part of the crowd. It's not just that now they are able to see, the crowd can just go on their way as before. The crowd has been changed too.

Jesus has shown them that he is not just a king on his way to a triumphal entry to his capital. The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and Jesus' hands are kind hands.

He has shown them how to serve, how to stop, how to enter into someone's situation, to let them speak, however disruptive or uncomfortable it might be, and how to ask what it is that they want to be done, asking people what they want, and not assuming that we know best.

[21:28] But the crowd hasn't only been changed by Jesus. Accepting the two men has had an effect as well. In the next chapter, in chapter 21, Matthew describes Jesus' entry to Jerusalem with the familiar palm leaves and cries of Hosanna, and blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

But uniquely among the gospel writers, Matthew also records that the crowd shout, Hosanna to the son of David. They have learned to address Jesus the same way that the two men do.

The two men have taught the choir a new song. Just as the once blind men can now see Jesus as clearly as the crowd could, so now the crowd can see Jesus as clearly as the men did while they were blind, as a healing Messiah, as a compassionate king who stops and serves.

The crowd that once rebuked them has been changed by accepting the two men. The cry of the two blind men of Jericho, son of David, has become the cry of the crowds welcoming Jesus in triumph and glory.

The crowd were already following Jesus. They knew where he was going. They had some idea of who he was and they were ready to follow him all the way.

[23 : 03] But accepting two new members from the wayside, from somewhere that they preferred to reject and walk on by, has given them a new way of understanding Jesus.

And so, when next week we sing Hosanna to the son of David, we should think of the two men and of that process of being changed.

The story challenged us not only to learn how to serve, how to use our hands to heal, to learn to ask what we can do for others, to use our hands as kind hands, but it also challenges us as we step into someone's situation to be open to how accepting them might change us, how touching them is also them touching us, and how that might change what we do, how that might open our eyes to see Jesus in a new way.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, son of David, we ask that you would teach us to see you as a healing Messiah.

We ask that you would teach us how to listen to others, to those who you call us to serve. we ask that you would teach us to stop, to take time to not pass by those that we would otherwise rebuke or reject.

[24 : 55] We ask that you would teach us to touch, to learn ways to communicate with others, and we ask you would teach us how to be touched, to allow those we encounter and those we serve to work your work on us as we try and do your work with them.

Amen. God