

The sight of the blind

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[0 : 00] The reading today is taken from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 20, verses 29-34, and that can be found on page 995.

And as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him, that's Jesus, 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.

The crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David. And stopping, Jesus called them and said, what do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Lord, let our eyes be opened. And Jesus, in pity, touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.

As we begin, I'll lead us in prayer. Our Father, we thank you for your rich and living word, and we pray that you would open our eyes this morning, that we would see and take to heart wonderful things in this your word, for we pray it in Jesus' name.

[1 : 20] Amen. We live in a driven, fast-paced, high-achieving world city. And we all know what it takes to succeed here.

It takes native ability, good education, perhaps a dose of social charm, lots of hard work, lots of drive, and plenty of commitment.

Those are the attributes and the characteristics that our society values. And they're the things that will help us get ahead in a place like London. Well, education, ambition, ability, those things might get us ahead in this world.

But Jesus is at pains in this section of Matthew's Gospel to demonstrate to us that things work differently in the kingdom of heaven. When it comes to his kingdom, the advantages of this world are, in fact, no advantage at all.

A repeated refrain of this section of Matthew's Gospel that we've been looking at over recent weeks is this. The first will be last, and the last first.

[2 : 36] And time and time again, Jesus has shown us in recent verses that our expectations of merit and reward, of effort and success, well, in God's economy, they're turned upside down.

And we're in for some surprises. Here at the end of Matthew chapter 20, Jesus is rounding off his teaching on this theme of the first being last. And he meets two men who have, well, no advantage at all in this world.

But who nonetheless seem to advance to the very front of the queue in receiving his attention and his concern, even his mercy. Two centuries ago, the composer Joseph Hayden described London's fog as being so thick that one might have spread it on bread.

And in recent days, we've experienced, again, one of London's famed fogs. Heavy air, poor visibility, and of course, hundreds of flights delayed at Heathrow.

There is a sense in which we've been stumbling through a bit of a fog in these recent verses in Matthew's Gospel. It's as if the people who have been meeting Jesus and engaging with Jesus have been suffering from limited visibility.

[3 : 55] Their view of both him and of themselves has been incomplete, distorted, and skewed. But in our passage this morning, at the end of the chapter, it's as though the fog lifts and we come into the light of day.

And the deep irony of these verses is this. Of all the people who have encountered Jesus of late, it's actually the two blind men who see with the greatest clarity.

Despite all their disadvantages, despite their physical disability, they have the spiritual insight to see both themselves and to see Jesus with great clarity.

And in ways that others have failed to see. We're going to focus our attention this morning on the spiritual sight of these two blind men. And we'll simply take each of those two areas in turn. Their sight of themselves and their sight of Jesus. First then, these blind men saw themselves clearly. This week has brought something of a technological revolution to our household because Gemma and I have both bought new phones.

[5 : 11] I generally don't approve of new technology on principle and I dislike spending any money on it very much. But our old phones had essentially stopped working after many years of not working very well.

My old BlackBerry probably belonged somewhere in a museum by now. I've not seen anyone else on the tube or on the train using the same model for many years now. But I liked it and it essentially did what I needed it to do most of the time.

But now with my new phone, I've come to see what I was really missing out on before. When I talk on the phone, the sound quality is amazing. It's like the person I'm talking to is in the same room or at least on the same continent as I am.

And the camera, well I liked the camera on my BlackBerry just fine. But the focus and the sharpness of the color on this new one, it's fabulous. And now in light of the new one, I realize that the old was decidedly average.

The new phone shows up all the flaws of the old. To grasp how very clearly these men at the end of chapter 20 are seeing themselves, we need to step back just for a moment into the fog of the previous verses and just observe how imperfectly others were seeing before.

[6 : 33] A few weeks ago, we encountered the rich young man of chapter 19. He imagined that he had something to offer Jesus, something that God would like to have from him.

Chapter 19, verse 16. Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life? This rich young man thought that he could bring God to the bargaining table and he reckoned he was in a position of power.

He had assets and ability and presumably God must want something from him. But the tragic reality is that there was nothing that this man could do or give in order to secure eternal life.

Despite his pretensions, he was in a position of total weakness. And yet he couldn't see it. He was blind to himself, thoroughly deluded.

Then, of course, there was Peter who thought not that God wanted something from him, but rather that God owed him something for his service. Verse 27 of chapter 19.

[7 : 37] See, we've left everything and followed you. What then will we have, says Peter? Jesus, we've made some pretty significant sacrifices here as your disciples.

What do you have in store for us? What's the payback? That same attitude comes out even more starkly in the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Chapter 20, verse 21. Jesus said to her, what do you want? She said to him, say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom. My boys have made sacrifices for you.

This has been costly for them. They've given up careers and home. They've made financial sacrifices to be your disciples. Jesus, you owe them. The rich young man thinks he can give God something.

The disciples think that God owes them something. They cannot see the reality about themselves. They're in a fog of self-delusion.

[8 : 38] But by stunning contrast, at the end of chapter 20, these blind men see with perfect clarity the reality about themselves. Picture the scene with me.

Jesus is on his way up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Hearing his teaching, a crowd has gathered around him on the journey, and they're walking with him.

And as they make their way out of Jericho, the final stop on the pilgrim journey, up to Jerusalem, they come upon two blind men sitting at the roadside, presumably there to beg.

Sitting by the roadside on a busy travel route meant they probably got up-to-date local news all the time. And so they'd probably heard something about Jesus and his reputation, that he was a healer and a teacher, that some thought he was the promised Messiah.

And they were intrigued. Given that the Passover festival was coming, there would probably have been quite a lot of traffic on the road that particular day. But the two men heard an unusual commotion coming down the Jericho end of the road.

[9 : 48] Lots of voices. Lots of footsteps. Probably they asked a passerby, what was going on? What's all the commotion? Why all this noise? And they were told Jesus of Nazareth is coming and a pretty big crowd is following him.

These two blind men recognized this is our opportunity. This is a moment we mustn't miss. They have no shame. They have nothing to lose.

And they call that at the top of their voices. End of verse 30. Lord, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us. What a contrast this is to the rich young man who comes to Jesus with his checkbook, his abilities, his moral track record.

What do you want me to do? What a contrast this is to the disciples who come asking, what are you going to do for me? What reward are we due?

Nothing of that from these two blind men. Lord, have mercy is their plea. These men know that they have nothing to offer Jesus and they know that he owes them nothing.

[10 : 59] So they cry out for him simply to show mercy, to show undeserved kindness to them, to meet them in their need. To get to the heart of this incident and its implications for us, we need to recognize that the physical disability of these two men points us to a deeper need, a spiritual need.

Very often in the Gospels, the material directly surrounding an incident or an encounter gives us insight into the meaning of that particular encounter. And this little encounter in verses 29 to 34 is preceded by verse 28, by Jesus' statement that he will give his life as a ransom for many.

It's then followed at the start of chapter 21 with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, which of course, where of course he is going with the express purpose of giving his life for his people.

So the context tells us that this little incident must have something to do with Jesus' death and its implications. This little incident is recorded here to teach us something about why Jesus died and what he will achieve.

These two blind men are two of the verse 28, many people for whom Jesus is going to die. They need a ransom and Jesus' death in Jerusalem is going to set them free.

[12 : 35] These men are not simply trapped in broken bodies, although they are trapped in broken bodies. They're not simply stuck by the road because they cannot see, although of course they are. More deeply and more significantly, more seriously, they are in bondage to sin and trapped by its consequences.

They, like all people, have turned away from the living God. in rebellion and in sin, not acknowledging him, not obeying him, not living life under his rule.

And they have become slaves to their rebellion and they are bound to face an eternal judgment. As is so often the case in the Gospels, the physical affliction of these men and their physical brokenness acts as a vivid illustration of their spiritual state and their spiritual need.

And it's a need that each one of us here shares. It's the natural condition of all people, even nice, respectable people like us. It's a condition of spiritual blindness and spiritual bondage because of the rejection of our creator.

And as these two men cry out to Jesus for mercy, they model to each one of us a cry that we need to cry to the Lord Jesus. Like you and like me, these men are broken sinners in need of a savior.

[14 : 04] And mercy was just the right thing to ask for that day. Each day on my journey up to the office at London Bridge, I walk through one of the old subways under the Elephant and Castle roundabout.

Perhaps you've been there. Almost every day, there is a man sitting at the side of the walkway as I go by asking for spare change. I was thinking about him this week as I was looking at this passage and considering these two blind beggars.

And as I thought about them and pictured him, it occurred to me that I don't think I could ever do what he does. I've never been in real need like he is.

I've never been really hungry, I don't think. So of course, I don't know how I'd actually respond to the situation. But as far as I can tell right now, I think I'd rather die than sit and beg at a roadside. I guess most of us here in this room this morning feel more or less the same way. We could never imagine begging. It would be too much to bear, too humiliating.

[15 : 15] But the stark lesson of our passage is that you and I, if we don't know how to beg, we couldn't imagine begging, we'd be unwilling to beg. The stark message is this, we need to learn how to do it.

We need to acquire that skill. That is, I think, a very hard lesson for people in a place like Dulwich to learn. But these two blind men at the end of Matthew 20 are just the teachers we need.

When Jesus finished speaking with that rich young man back in chapter 19, he said to his disciples, verse 23, Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven.

Again, I tell you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Why is that? Why is it so hard for the rich to be saved?

I think it's hard, at least in part, because the rich don't know how to beg. They don't like the thought of it. We would sooner die than do it. Yet the poor and the destitute, well, they know how to beg.

[16:27] They've long ago broken through the shame and the pain barrier. They know they're destitute, hopeless and helpless. And so asking for help, asking for mercy, well, it's what they do.

And of course, that is the only thing that any of us can do. You and I, despite perhaps our good education, our tidy clothes, our nice homes, our respectable jobs, and all the rest of it, despite those things, we are destitute, hopeless, and helpless.

We are those who have turned away from the living God in rebellion and self-rule and in gratitude. We've incurred his righteous anger and we, in our natural state, face a very bleak future.

Our natural state, our natural situation, is far worse than homelessness and hunger. It is nothing short of eternal death.

And these blind men, these helpless and hopeless beggars at the roadside, have something to teach you and have something to teach me this morning. I guess for many of us, our life situation is far more like the situation of that rich young man.

[17:46] We think we have something to offer. We think we have something to give. We're happy to work and we'd sooner die than beg. But actually, we need to learn to cry out for mercy.

Perhaps some of us here this morning, I don't know, perhaps we've never done that. You've never cried out. You've never asked the Lord Jesus for mercy. Perhaps you've never seen before your true spiritual condition before God, a sinner, a rebel, one facing judgment.

If that's you, if the very idea of asking God for mercy is new to you, you never knew Christianity was about asking for mercy. mercy, if you've never really known what it would mean to become a follower of Jesus, then perhaps that's just what you need to do this morning, to cry out for mercy.

Many of us here, most of us, I guess, will have seen our need before now. We've heard something of this before and we once cried out for mercy and received salvation from the Lord Jesus.

For most of us, the challenge of these verses is not to make that initial response. We've done that. I think the challenge here is for us to remember how we stand before the Lord Jesus and to be continually filled with wonder and with gratitude.

[19:14] However far we progress in the Christian life, however much we grow, however much we serve, however much we give, we're never more than helpless sinners, spiritual beggars who rest entirely on the mercy of our Savior.

Despite their blindness, these two men saw themselves with remarkable clarity. But not only that, and this is our second point, our second observation, these two blind men saw Jesus clearly.

This passage is the final incident, the final encounter in Jesus' traveling ministry ministry. In the very next verses, he enters Jerusalem, and the focus of the gospel then shifts very directly to the countdown to the cross.

The big question running throughout, really, the whole of Matthew's gospel, the whole of Jesus' itinerant ministry has been this. Who is this man, and what has he come to do?

As we noticed earlier, it's almost as though everyone encountering Jesus in recent verses has met him in a fog of partial understanding. The rich young man, chapter 19 and verse 16, called Jesus, teacher.

[20:27] Teacher, what must I do? He was a teacher to this man who could tell him what was necessary for salvation. The disciples clearly knew a little bit more.

It wasn't that Jesus was going to provide some self-help on the way to heaven. Their fog was less deep, less intense. They clearly knew that Jesus was God's promised king, his Messiah, sent to bring salvation.

But they still didn't really know what his kingship was all about. The mother of the sons of Zebedee and her two disciple sons, they clearly thought that Jesus was the kind of a king who would dole out gifts to his loyal subjects.

Following this king was the path to honor and influence, perhaps even to riches and to splendor. Jesus had to correct the disciples' wrong thinking and their wrong understanding and he had to teach them, verse 28, that he came as a king not to inhabit a palace and to dole out lavish gifts, but instead to serve others by his death and so provide a ransom for those captive to sin and captive to its consequences.

And those two blind men, whatever they knew and understood about Jesus, and they may not have known much, but they had one fundamental and true insight about him.

[21 : 48] He has come as a king of mercy to serve those in need. Verse 30, they cried out, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David.

Unlike the rich young man, they saw that Jesus was not merely a teacher, but Lord, God himself. And more than that, they recognized that he was the son of David, the promised Messiah, the long-awaited king of Israel, in the line of great king David.

And so they believed that he had the power not simply to instruct them, but actually to save them. And unlike the disciples, these blind men saw that Jesus came to show mercy to the needy rather than honor to the mercenary.

Astonishingly, the crowd, verse 31, quite possibly including the disciples here, the crowd thought that these blind men had got it all wrong. Verse 31, the crowd rebuked them, telling them to be silent, but they cried out all the more, Lord, have mercy on us, son of David.

Surely this king, on his way to Jerusalem, to his enthronement, surely he has more important matters to deal with, bigger fish to fry. Don't get in his way. Don't slow him down.

[23 : 07] But who had it right? The crowd, perhaps even the disciples, or the beggar? Verse 32 shows us. And stopping, Jesus called to them and said, what do you want me to do for you?

It's more or less the same question he asked the mother of the sons of Zebedee in verse 21. She asked for honor for her sons. Complete misunderstanding. She saw Jesus through a fog.

But these blind men see what kind of a king stands before them. Verse 33, Lord, let our eyes be opened. Heal us.

Save us. And Jesus, in pity, touched their eyes and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. Having been healed, having received mercy at the hand of the Lord Jesus, these two men did the only thing they could, the only rational thing, the only sensible thing.

They stood up and they followed Jesus along the way to Jerusalem. For a number of months now, I've suspected that my vision is probably well short of 2020.

[24 : 22] When I read on my Kindle in the evening, increasingly, I'm finding that my eyes feel strained. And often, I'm catching myself worryingly, actually closing one eye to try and just keep focus on the typeface.

I've increased the size this week, actually, to super jumbo, hoping that that might help a little bit. But I don't really want glasses, so I've just been putting the whole thing off and ignoring it.

Our passage this morning prompts us to ask the uncomfortable question, how good is your vision? How well do you see yourself? And how well do you see Jesus?

Do you and I see ourselves primarily not as educated people, perhaps, successful people, maybe, people with something to offer, something to give, but as needy people, as hopeless sinners in need of a Savior?

And do we see Jesus not first and foremost as a giver of lavish gifts, the one who can make my life better, my life more fulfilled, the one who can satisfy my desires?

[25 : 27] No, do we see Jesus as a king who came to show mercy, who came to heal, who came to forgive, a king who came to meet my deepest need by dying in my place on the cross?

It may be that for one or two here, this is all really quite new. You've never seen yourself in this light, and you've never seen Jesus with such clarity.

And it may be that the response you need to make this morning is to cry out to him for mercy, for healing, for forgiveness, and then being assured of his forgiveness and his mercy for those who ask for it, well, to follow him as these men followed him.

For others of us, and I guess this is most of us, as I suggested before, it may be that we once saw ourselves and our Savior quite clearly, but actually, our vision has grown dim over the months and the years.

Perhaps as a younger person, you came to a point of recognizing your desperate need for a Savior, your need for forgiveness, for cleansing, for mercy. But as the months and the years have drifted

by, you've forgotten that the gift Jesus offers is the gift of mercy, and you've come to expect other gifts from him.

[26 : 56] Like the sons of Zebedee, you've come to expect maybe gifts of relational happiness or the gift of academic success, the gift of career advancement, of financial security.

And perhaps you've grown a bit disappointed when Jesus hasn't come through for you, when he's refused to dance to your tune, as the sons of Zebedee doubtless felt disappointed.

Well, if that's you, with the blind men, see afresh this morning that Jesus has come to give mercy and to give healing. And see again that there is nothing more wonderful than that gift.

For these men, sight meant life and a future. And for you and me, the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ means life from the dead and hope for eternity.

And what more could he give? Perhaps you've altogether lost sight of the fact that Jesus has come to serve his people. And for you, following this king has become something of a burden rather than a delight.

[28 : 11] You slip back into the worldly way of thinking of this rich young man that we met earlier and you think that the onus is all on you. God requires me to serve well, to give generously, to evangelize enthusiastically.

and it's all become a burden for you. If that's you, then see again with these blind men that King Jesus has come in the first place to serve you in your state of helplessness and need.

See once more that your healing and your right standing before him rests entirely on his mercy and not your merit. one way that we'll know that we've lost sight of these things in the Christian life I think is if our discipleship is marked by a lack of joy and a lack of gratitude.

I imagine that if we're honest many of us would say that joylessness and ingratitude do mark our Christian lives at least sometimes if not often. well if that's the case what we need is not to be told to be more joyful or more grateful that probably won't do us much good.

What we need is a fresh realization that spiritually speaking you and I well we were at the roadside without a hope in the world. We were these blind men they were us.

[29 : 37] Our spiritual condition was no better than the physical condition of the man on the walkway under the roundabout at elephants but Jesus showed pity.

He had mercy on me and he had mercy on you. As John Newton the cruel slave trader turned grateful disciple so famously wrote amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now I'm found was blind but now I see. Let's take a moment to consider our own response and then I'll lead us in a prayer.

And Jesus in pity touched their eyes and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him. God our Father we thank you for the extraordinary mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

we thank you that he is kind and gracious he has pity on those in desperate need. We pray that we would be filled with wonder at his kindness and we pray that each one of us would follow him with grateful hearts in his name we pray.

[30 : 56] Amen.