

THE CRY THAT WOULD NOT BE SILENCED

Luke 18:35-43

Leo Douma

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Our text focuses on a blind beggar. Luke 18:35 *“As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.”* Can you see him in your mind’s eye, begging for survival? His voice pleading, ‘Please, give to the poor’. We don’t have to imagine what a beggar looks like. We can see them on the streets in Melbourne. The beggar is often symbolic of an economy gone bad, or corrupt government. Or famine conditions, as so often happens in Africa. But the existence of the beggar in our text is also an indicator of something even deeper. He is also an indicator of the people’s spiritual state. Our relationship with God is very much interwoven with our economics and sense of justice. We must not live as if the spiritual is split off from the rest of life. This beggar in Luke’s gospel is not only a victim of the Roman oppression in Israel. The fact is that the beggar was a spiritual anomaly in Israel. His begging at the gate of Jericho was a sign of how low Israel had sunk in her spiritual life.

A beggar should never have been in Israel. God had made that clear in his law. Deuteronomy outlined how God’s people were to live in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 15:4 *“There should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God...”* If Israel was faithful, God would bless them, and they would live well. With that abundance they would have been able to look after the stranger that came into their land as well as the poor. In fact, God had specifically commanded they do so. Deuteronomy 15:7,8 *“If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight fisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.”* God had deliberately set a whole system of laws so that no one would ever have to suffer the indignity of having to beg. For example, the law of leaving the edges of the wheat field uncleared. That meant any poor person could come and take what they needed, knowing it was their God given right. Think here of the story of Ruth, the great grandmother of King David. Or think of the ‘Year of Jubilee’. Every fifty years all the debts in Israel was cancelled. Every family could go back to their own land and be poor no longer. Obedience to these laws was part of the faith response of Israel. So, if Israel was being faithful, that beggar would never have been there. The beggar must have suffered, not only from an empty stomach, but also from spiritual depression. He

would have thought, 'Those who should have loved me, have abandoned me. There is no respect or care for me. I should not be here like this!' I would suggest thousands, no millions of hungry people, starving and dying feel like that. It is not only the empty food pots or empty bellies that hurt. That is devastating enough. It is more the feeling of utter rejection and despair. Knowing there are others who live in abundance, while they starve. Their feeling so often is 'We are unwanted. We are unseen and useless. We should not be here like this!'

No, the beggar should not be there on the side of the road. But nobody does anything about it. There are those who put the occasional coin in his hand. But more often it is to quieten their own conscience. It is ironic. All those passing by are on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They are there to celebrate their liberation from slavery, their Exodus from Egypt. They remember how God saved them from being the poorest of nations, the outcasts of the world. Yet, no one does anything for this beggar, this poor outcast of their society. They are going to Jerusalem to thank God for their deliverance. But forget the most basic ways for thanking God. They forget God's basic laws of justice and mercy. Micah 6:8 *"...what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God."* I suppose the people just simply did not want to be involved. They were busy. They had enough of their own issues. They just wanted to be happy. They did not want to go through the trauma of getting their emotions in a turmoil, or their hands dirty by caring for this beggar. Society hasn't changed much. Ours is a very materialistic society, with an emphasis on personal success and wealth. We are materialistic rich but very time poor. It's hard to make time for others. If you are down and out, often you can be left behind, forgotten. The homeless will tell you that. We hardly see them. It's only when the media focuses on them. Like when the homeless squat on Flinders Street we see them for a while. All the while the poor and lonely suffer. True, churches do massive work for the poor and homeless. Even the national surveys will admit that, while Christianity is being scorned, it has to be admitted that all the work done by Christians helping the poor is much appreciated. But even we, after doing our bit, like the idea of going to our comfortable homes, content to do our own thing. We don't really question the structures and politics and the possibilities that our own lifestyles impact on the poor.

Yes, we see all this as the enormous crowd heading to Jerusalem, goes by the blind beggar. Little notice is taken of him. That is until Jesus comes along. It is then that the beggar's ears prick up. Luke 18 :36 & 37 *"When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, 'Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.'"* You can imagine the beggar thinking 'Jesus will do something. He will get involved.' He had heard the stories about Jesus. He was the one who healed the sick, and the blind. He was the one who

feed the hungry. Jesus was the one who was willing to mix with societies outcasts and underdogs. So, the beggar cried out to get Jesus' attention (Luke 18:38) *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me"*. Now, do you hear what he says? Here we see the irony again. The blind beggar is not so blind. The crowd spoke of 'Jesus of Nazareth'. But look at what the beggar calls him: *"Jesus, Son of David"*! In other words, he recognises Jesus as the king spoken of in Psalm 72. (Psalm 72:1-4, 12) *"Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor...For he will deliver the needy who cry out, and the afflicted who have no one to help them."* So, the beggar cries out! Matthew in his version of this incident uses a Greek word that means to scream. The word is used to describe the screaming of the insane, of women in childbirth. So, the beggar is really screaming. We can understand that. Amid this huge crowd of thousands, he wants to be heard. There is anguish and desperation here.

But to the crowd of people this beggar going off his head is an irritant. (Luke 18:39) *"Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet..."* You can imagine them saying 'Be quiet! Stop being so annoying. You can't just scream and demand attention. Besides Jesus has not got time for the likes of you.' You will notice when you read this chapter 18 of Luke that time and again this attitude is repeated. Luke shows people thinking that Jesus has no time for others. Especially the poor, the powerless and the 'unimportant'. We see it in the parable of the 'persistent widow' (Luke 18:1-8). In those days no one was less powerless than the widows or orphans. Again, we see it in the attitude of the disciples. They say to the parents that Jesus has no time for their children. (15-17) But we see that Jesus welcomed the children. In fact, he said we all must become like children to enter the kingdom. Now it comes out again with this crowd, dealing with this beggar. 'Be quiet! Why should Jesus pay attention to someone like you?' We need to be careful we don't make Jesus say things to excuse our own non-involvement. Like saying 'Jesus is concerned only about spiritual matters, not political. This is a political problem. All we have to do is pray about these things. Not get involved in the structures to ensure justice is done'. But the beggar will not be quiet. He recognises where his only hope lies. He will not be silenced! (Luke 18:39) *"...but he shouted all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'"*

The question is how will Jesus respond? The setting is that it's a few days before Palm Sunday. There is a huge crowd streaming to Jerusalem. One estimate says up to three million people came from all over for the Passover. This huge crowd that is jostling him, in awe because of his miracles, will soon be cheering him on as he rides into

Jerusalem on the donkey. And then a week later they will scream for him to be crucified. Luke writes in 18:31-32 *"Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him..."* All of this would have been swirling around in Jesus' mind. He was very focused on getting to Jerusalem. Being there at that time was the whole point of his ministry. He knew he was going to be suffering terribly. And the multitude surrounding him had high expectations. So, would Jesus have any inclination to give time to this beggar who is crying out? After all beggars were everywhere. There were a lot of blind people in Israel. Blindness was so common Jesus used blindness as an illustration of what it was to be ignorant of God.

I would suggest when Jesus heard the beggar, it must have been like music in his ears. No, not the cry of desperation. But the words of faith. For the blind beggar on the side of the road recognised Jesus for who he really was. The 'blind' beggar had a 'glimpse' of the 'Messiah'. He saw Jesus as the promised 'Son of David', the Redeemer of Israel, the one who would bring mercy and justice. How he came to know this we don't know. But what is significant is that the words of the beggar have over the past two thousand years been the cry of the church. The words 'Lord, have mercy' is known as the 'Kyrie eleison'. As a liturgy of confession, it is recited by millions of Christians every week. *"Son of David, have mercy on me"*. The plea is deep and desperate. He confesses his pitiable condition. There is also a measure of repentance there. He recognises he can offer nothing. He can give no reason why Jesus should help him. He is totally at the mercy of his Lord. Let me suggest to you that you have not really understood the significance of Jesus in your life until you have cried out *"Jesus, have mercy on me."* Until you recognise how broken you are, and cry for mercy, you have not appreciated what Jesus achieved at the cross. Look at how Jesus responds. He has the man brought to him and asks (Luke 18:40-41) *"What do you want me to do for you?"* Do you get what Jesus says? It is just stunning. The creator of the universe, with the weight of the world on his shoulders, wants to be a servant for this beggar everyone wants to push away. Do you see how Jesus treats him with dignity and empowers him? He lets the beggar set the agenda. *"What do you want me to do for you?"* "How can I help you? How can I serve you?" This is mercy. This is grace. It gives us a clue to the attitude of Jesus. He came to serve, all the way to the cross. The blind beggar says straight out *"Lord, I want to see...Jesus said to him 'Receive your sight; your faith has healed you"*. It is said to simply, but the implications are huge. No wonder the beggar, and the crowd praised God. From Jesus the beggar received the dignity and care he should have had from his Jewish brothers and sisters. This was Jesus last miracle. From now on he would go on to Jerusalem to serve humanity and all of creation.

As we reflect on this scene let's understand some implications. Jesus did not just pay for our sin and now we can sit back and enjoy life. That is a Western view, an individualistic view. Jesus came to bring justice, to deal with the structures that create injustice and poverty. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 4:18-19 (quoting Isaiah 61) *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight of the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"*. We as church represent Jesus in our communities. We need to demonstrate that Jesus brings hope to the poor and oppressed. It would not be good enough for us to go to church and praise his goodness if we at the same time were to neglect the downtrodden. The Apostle John writes in 1 John 3:17 *"If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth."*