

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Seeing Again

It's many years since I went to a cinema. I remember the days when there were two broadsheet columns of cinemas on page two of the *Evening News*, and I remember the rare visits we paid to them. We never found out when the film started beforehand; something was always in progress when we arrived; and it seemed that proceedings were regularly interrupted by people who whispered *This is where we came in, Elsie*, stood up, and left. An odd way to watch a story: start at the middle, go through to the end, and sit through the beginning until it gets familiar – then leave.

Where Do You Start?

For religious people there are many ways in which things don't happen in logical order. The classic picture of Paul sitting sightless in the middle of the Damascus road comes to mind; religion is always cutting our agenda to pieces, disorientating us, until we decide the only way forward is to go back. The technical term for this turning round is *conversion*; and it is easily misunderstood, because it looks like a dreary revisiting of the past, whereas it is really much more exciting. The answer to *where do you start?* is therefore: *here, but not facing the same way*. It's the direction of travel that makes the difference – the destination.

Bartimaeus the Blind Man

Bartimaeus can't see, but he can hear, and he hears the sounds of the crowd which encloses Jesus of Nazareth. This is when he starts to *shout*. A little while ago we read about a deaf man who couldn't speak, who was *brought* to Jesus by others. Here is a blind man, who is *prevented* by others from getting to Jesus, and who is loudly protesting. What a marvellous image of our need to pray when we are in the dark! The crowd is unsympathetic: and very often what will send us to pray is precisely the fact that only God will understand our need. The God who listens is clearly present as Jesus asks: *What do you want of me?* Bartimaeus calls him *dear Master*, and says: *Let me see again*.

Have You Lost Something?

One of the principles of the Christian life is that we should look to *Jesus'* life in order to interpret *ours*. This is such an engrossing principle that people will complain about his divinity, or his masculinity, or his distance from our times, or his

celibacy, or his Jewishness, and say: *How can I accept him as my teacher?* One of the ways in which he differs from some of us is that he never grew old. We lose our lives gradually, not in a brief execution. We lose our enthusiasm, our vision, our capacity for joy, our taste for life. We forget so much, and we don't even remember that we've forgotten; we think this is all that there is. Ebenezer Scrooge crawls home to his dark, cold house and sups on gruel because he has *forgotten* so much. The visitations of his three ghosts remind him comprehensively of his life – not only of his past, but of his present and future too.

Separated From Life

The people in the Gospel who are blind, deaf, unfeeling, and out of their minds suffer because they are at a distance from life itself. The coming of Jesus to them liberates them to re-possess the gift they had lost. So with the blind man, it is eloquent that he asks to be able to see *again*. I suppose it is a sort of humility to accept that we need to be re-created. For this, we need to have contact with the Creator, and to listen again to his word, which first raised us from idea to reality. This way of proceeding does something more: it puts us in mind of our destination, as well as of our origin. The experience of being newly-sighted *restores* to us what we had lost, the accumulated darkness of the blundering years: it also holds out to us a promise for the future, in which a faithful Creator will fulfil the hope he has offered to us.

Becoming A Disciple

That may explain why Bartimaeus, uninvited in word, *follows Jesus in the way*. It is as if the inrushing light that has flooded a man who had suffered in darkness actually picks him up and pushes him in the direction of Jesus: *Courage - he is calling you!* For the crowd, it was a moving-forward a couple of yards. For Bartimaeus, it was a summons to life which would lead him with Jesus to Calvary and the light of Easter: his first step the most momentous of his life. *Fr Philip*