**HEALING OF THE BLIND BEGGAR St Luke 18:35-43**

The account of the healing of the blind beggar appears in all four gospels though some stress the greater intensity of the opposition of the crowd to him with the words “many rebuked him telling him to be silent but he cried out the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me’”.

The story is familiar to most of us but it is most interesting if we read it not at the literal level but if we internalise it, transpose ourselves into the event and see what it has to say to us at the deeper spiritual level. If we do that and ask who the characters represent, we see that Christ is himself and we are the blind man. Like him we are waiting to have our spiritual eyes opened and be healed. After all we are taught by the Church that our life is about being healed day by day, a continuous process, and in our daily prayers we repeat our appeal to the Holy Spirit, “O Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Thy name’s sake”. Connected with this action is our desire ‘to see God’ as we are told in the beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. And in endeavouring to reach this state of purity so that we can see more clearly with spiritual sight there is much falling and getting up again. As St Seraphim himself stated, what is most required is a firm resolve and a refusal to give way to despair, which destroys our salvific ascetic struggle.

But who are the crowd in the account who tell the blind man ‘to shut up and get lost’ (to use the vernacular) and try to prevent the man from encountering Christ personally. The simple answer of course is that they are the devil or the forces of evil but such a naive solution, as in all cases, is final and admits of no further scientific or spiritual investigation. If we ask ourselves what are the obstructions to seeing God more clearly? we shall soon see that the solution to the problem is us and what is inside us since our final enemy is inside us. To begin with they are the passions and the temptations peculiar to each one of us and with which individually we have to do battle. They are the thorns in the parable of the sower which choke us and knock us off course spiritually. They are greed in its many forms: for power, wealth, sex, all the icons, or rather idols, with which, for example, the media world assaults us and convinces us that are indispensable to a fully enriched life. Also they are the worldly fears and worries which test our faith and lead us to believe that God neither sees us where we are nor cares sufficiently about us to help. And, of course, this leads to despair and loss of faith.

However, there is one obstruction on the path to seeing God to mention, which may shock you, and that is the church. The Church is our vehicle to salvation but it can be a major hindrance when we mistake the Church and the religious world for God and we lose our vision of Him. And this is particularly so in Orthodoxy where culture, art and music can become an end in themselves as the Communists wished and boiled the inner life out of the Orthodox Church. That is why the Buddhists say that to see God you must kill him regularly; that means to break the wooden image and way of seeing God that we have built up in ourselves and return to the infinite where He truly dwells. Our spiritual life is rekindled when we do this and that is why people go to the desert. The tools which are tried and proved and given to us are fasting, silence and prayer which bring peace to the soul and enable us to listen afresh for God’s unique voice in each one of us which is waiting to speak if we give it a chance. In the gospels Christ attacks the religious establishment, the so-called professionals, people like me, for not seeing with spiritual eyes and also for preventing others from doing so. On the other hand, he exalts the woman with the flow of blood, the centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman because they have inner certainty through faith. They are unacceptable to Israel but they know how God works and they recognise His ways in Christ. They push, demand and obtain healing because they see God clearly and understand what God wants for them, greater faith and trust. He tells the story of the woman who goes in the middle of the night to the judge demanding justice and of course she obtains it because she does not give up.

Some years ago I called up a member of the parish whom I had not seen for some time. He mentioned that he had a deep affection for each of the clergy of the parish but he could not deal inwardly with the traumatic battle which had taken place in the parish and diocese and had stopped coming because of the politics. This is perfectly understandable at the human level but it has always been like this to one degree or another in the Church, not least in the case of St John Chrysostom, the famous Archbishop of Constantinople, who was cast out by the emperor only to witness rehabilitation after his death.

The Church only has meaning when Christ and ourselves are at the centre of our inner focus. It is our experience of God and of our deeper understanding of his dealings with us that lead to faith and spiritual progress.

At this special time of the pandemic when all manner of obstacles are placed before us in our life together let us cry out like the blind Bartimaeus with increasing fervour, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” But more relevantly to the extent that we have lost our vision of God we need to echo his heartfelt cry to the Lord in response to his question “What do you want of me”,

“Let me recover my sight.”

***24th January 2021, Oxford***