

## Pentecost 22 Bartimeaus

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17	Ps 34: 1-18	Heb 7: 21-28	<b>Mark 10: 46-52</b>
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I want to begin today with a story about a day in 1986 in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. It is so far from anywhere that the man in question, Sibusiso “Punch” Mbhele was already 17 years old, on the day when he saw an aeroplane for the first time. A light plane buzzed near a playground at a school where Punch was a student.

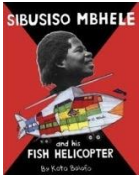
Punch, who is named after a washing powder, not for any aggressive tendencies, was fascinated by what he saw and told his friends that he was going to build a plane, which he did, the moment he got home from school. Later, his brother showed him a picture of a helicopter and he started to make choppers from waste metal and wire.

Not content with small replicas of aircraft, Punch embarked on a far bigger, more challenging project: to build a home shaped like a helicopter. He has been building helicopter houses ever since.

The first one he built in his mother’s yard caught the eye of foreign visitors and is recorded in a work on outsider art.



Raised on stilts to simulate flight, the home’s interior was decorated in bright, fantastical colours enhanced by coloured lighting. Mbhele’s planes also caught the attention of local and international gallery owners and started to earn him an income. However, with fame also came the envy of some in his community who caused trouble for him.



He went through a difficult period, alienated from his village and inhabitants who were fiercely resistant to attempts by outsiders to harness his talent. The more they tried to control him, the more he resisted until he eventually fled to Johannesburg where he took shelter with a benefactor.

However, the mountains and the silent space of his rural home called to him and he eventually returned to reconcile with the community.

Keen to set up home on his own, Mbhele tried to tow his helicopter house to a new location with a tractor and it collapsed. That was several years and several structures ago. He has lived on his current plot since 1997 and the home he lived in when I met him in 2010 was the eighth that he has built.



Mbhele calls his home a fish helicopter. He said: "I like the shape of fish and the way that they move; and helicopters move just like fish do." It is built from corrugated-iron sheeting and the shells of wrecked vehicles.

He creates planes and bicycles and other sculptures from wire, flattened motor oil cans and other waste materials. Like many "outsider artists", he is reticent, almost reclusive and to my knowledge has flown in an actual plane only once. He has seen a few more, mostly crop sprayers, but aircraft are infrequent visitors to the remote area where he lives. This is one of his creations:

Why have I told you this story?

Because an act of seeing changed Punch's life, not unlike Bartimaeus.

You are probably thinking "Yes, but Bartimaeus was physically blind and Punch was not." Yes; and no.

Yes, because Bartimaeus is described as "a blind beggar", so he is physically blind, but in other ways, he can "see" in ways that those around cannot.

Although he is an outsider, not unlike Punch, perhaps ostracised, sitting by the roadside, unable to see this group coming along, Bartimaeus knows that this Jesus of Nazareth can heal him. He can "see with the eyes of the soul", if you like, that this Son of David is special.

The crowds try to shut him up, he is an embarrassment, but he persists and shouts even louder. And when the Teacher, "Rabboni" other translations have, calls Bartimaeus to him, suddenly the crowd's attitude changes and they help and enable him.

Bartimaeus knows what he needs: Mercy. He knows he does not deserve nor has earned healing but asks for it anyway. "My teacher, let me see again." Interesting language as it suggests he was not born blind, as the man in John Ch 9, who is called "A man born blind". However, there are two different versions of this story, other translations have him say simply "I want to see" rather than "I want to regain my sight".

And did you notice that he throws off his cloak? This is a significant detail as a man's cloak in that time was his most precious possession, particularly a beggar: His home, his blanket, his only wealth. It's not insignificant that the Law prohibited taking a beggar's cloak for more than a day: *If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset (Ex 22, 25).*

Bartimaeus is willing to risk his most precious possession to get to this man who can offer him so much more: Not just his sight, but also meaning and purpose, restoration to community, relationship with God.

Notice that Jesus does not call him to follow, but says simply: "Go; your faith has made you well." We have heard that before in other stories. However, Bartimaeus chooses to become a disciple of Jesus and "follow him on the way".

An act of seeing with the eyes of the soul changes Bartimaeus' life, not unlike Punch's life changed with an act of physical seeing.

What "act of seeing" will change us?

What is it that we want Jesus to do for us?

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