



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

How do you define determination? Perhaps for you it is like watching Paula Radcliff attempting to run the Marathon in Athens. For some this was determination. For others determination is a single mum attempting to rear her children on her own. For others it might be like a child working hard at something and refusing to give up until the task at hand is completed. Lately there is a movement on the internet that you may have heard of called www.werenotafraid.com. This is a website that proudly proclaims its determination to keep normality and freedom alive in spite of terrorist violence. They proclaim:

We are not afraid to ride public transportation. We are not afraid to walk down a crowded street. We are not afraid of each other. We are not afraid to say that terrorism in any form is never the answer. *We're not afraid* is an outlet for the global community to speak out against the acts of terror that have struck London, Madrid, New York, Baghdad, Basra, Tikrit, Gaza, Tel-Aviv, Afghanistan, Bali, and against the atrocities occurring in cities around the world each and every day. It is a worldwide action for people not willing to be cowed by terrorism and fear mongering. The historical response to these types of attacks has been a show of deadly force; we believe that there is a better way. We refuse to respond to aggression and hatred in kind. Instead, we who are not afraid will continue to live our lives the best way we know how. We will work, we will play, we will laugh, we will live. We will not waste one moment, nor sacrifice one bit of our freedom, because of fear. **We are not afraid.**

I believe that in many ways all these people and situations show us forms of determination but for me there is another form of determination and that is embodied in today's reading. ⁴⁶Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The picture of pure determination is contained in this idea of blind Bartimaeus. Picture the scene if you can in your mind's eye. It was coming close to Passover time and this required that all young men aged 12 years old and above were required to head to Jerusalem. Very often rabbis, teachers would make the journey to Jerusalem with a group of their disciples following alongside them. As he would walk along the road he would teach them at the same time. There were some who were not able to go to Jerusalem for various reasons and so they would line the streets to greet the pilgrims and wish them a safe journey as they made their way along the road.

This day in question we find Jesus fulfilling the role of the rabbi. As he and his disciples and a sizable crowd are making their way through new Jericho because if you remember the original Jericho had been leveled by Joshua many many years ago. New Jericho was about a mile away from the original site. As they passed through, there was amongst the crowd a man of fantastic determination, a man who would not be silenced, a man who knew what he wanted and who could help him. Because of his blindness he couldn't see Jesus but he knew someone special was coming and so after he had enquired as to who it was he started his petition. He wasn't afraid to be noticed ⁴⁸Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

What determination, those around him tried to silence him and yet he tried all the more to be heard. There was opposition to him and the way he was going about getting Jesus attention. But isn't it wonderful that we don't read that after he was put down by those around he kept quiet and Jesus walked on by. No he knew that Jesus was the answer for his problem. He had faith in this person he had never met, let alone set eyes on. So he showed his determination not by simply keeping going but by raising the cry louder and louder. This is determination. He knew that Jesus was the only hope he had and so he wasn't prepared to be discouraged or put off in any way. What do you do when you are discouraged? What do you do when Satan says to you, "there is no point, you are banging your head against a brick wall. No one wants to listen – no one wants to help, stop before this gets too embarrassing!" Do you listen to him or do you call him by his true name – the father of lies and deceit. Or do you call for support from those around you and ask them to stand with you and to join in the shout to Jesus?

We need each other in much the same way as one piece of coal needs the others around it to give it the light and heat it needs to glow and burn. If a coal falls out of the fire onto the hearth it won't be long before it becomes hard and cold. We need each other to encourage each other, to build each other up in faith and to add our voices to the one who would otherwise be discouraged in our cry to the Lord. We read: ⁴⁹Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." ⁵⁰Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. ⁵¹"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." Wait till I tell you something – Jesus heard this man the moment he first cried out. Jesus didn't only begin to hear him as he raised his voice, as he began to shout, but Jesus heard him as he drew breath to cry out his first word. This man had called to the Lord and now the people who a moment earlier had tried to silence him brought him the good news that the one who had been called upon was not doing the calling. Bartimaeus was calling Jesus to him now Jesus was saying – you come to me. Once permission is granted he wastes no time, he is on his feet and running to Jesus, leaving his cloak behind him in his eagerness because he knew it would slow him down. Even today Jesus is still calling us to him. We are slow in responding because before we are willing to come to him we want to make sure we are doing it on our terms and so instead of dropping all and running to him we hold back and gather our luggage and baggage. We come to him with our complaints, our worries, our doubts, our fears, our hurts and wounds from life and as we drag these things to him we are slowed down.

Jesus knows about those things but those are not the things we are really bringing to him to because we come to him with a desire that he should meet our needs not that he should see our baggage. What is slowing you from coming to Jesus? Jesus is calling you today to come to him – what is slowing you down in coming "just as you are" in faith? Cast it off and run to him in faith. When you come to him you too will hear him ask you: ⁵¹"What do you want me to do for you?" Of course he wanted to see. He was blind, and we assume that he must have wanted to see.

The temptation here is for us to miss the wonderful fact that even though this man's physical eyes could not see his spiritual eyes were wide open. We come to Jesus very often asking for this that or the other and these things are important to us and I don't wish in any way to diminish your problems but how many of us have asked Jesus for sight?

How many of us have asked for spiritual sight to see and understand just who Jesus is? If when Jesus asks us "What do you want me to do for you?" we answer "I want to see" then and only then will we begin to realize that what our real need is. ⁵²"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

What an amazing end to this short story. The compassion of Jesus heals this man because of the faith that this man had. But this man I believe gets more than his sight restored. He is blessed for his faith. His faith had him believe that Jesus could do this for him. His faith had him shout out at the top of his lungs for Jesus to help him and have mercy on him. His faith was big enough to ask of Jesus the seemingly impossible and yet as we know from this reading nothing is impossible for God. He had been credited for his faith. At that moment in time he became a true believer. At that moment in time he was saved. How do we know? Look at what happens. Jesus tells him "Go – your faith has healed you." What we miss in what Jesus actually said to this man is huge.

In the Greek this word we have sloppily translated "go" is far bigger than "go". As we read "Go" we are hearing Jesus say away you go now, go on. We are hearing Jesus almost chasing this man away from him. It is almost as if Jesus doesn't want this man anywhere near him and so he is sending him away! Our translation is such a poor one. What Jesus is actually saying to him is "hu-pag-ae" which isn't so much **go** as it is "you are now a free person to do whatever you please." This man has just been given his sight and his now has the world at his feet. He can go anywhere, do anything now because the thing that held him captive has been removed. He is truly free but look at what he does with his freedom. "Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road." He followed. He didn't want to go anywhere else. He didn't want to be anywhere else but in Jesus presence and with those who were following Jesus. He was determined to follow Jesus.

I have been tempted to become discouraged this week... Let me explain what I mean.

No prayer life before the evening service last Sunday evening, numbers well down in our midweek bible study groups. People telling me that no one talks to them in church. A week when we had to close down our anchor boys and Junior section of our BB because we could not get enough people to help in leadership.

There are more confessing followers of Jesus Christ in this congregation for the size of this congregation than any other church in Coleraine and yet as Jesus has freed us from our sin and the things that held us

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down, have we been tempted when we have heard Jesus say hu-pag-ae, “Go” have we gone, turning away from the opportunity of serving, and following and fellowship?

I cannot answer this for you, each one of us needs to look deep within our souls to see what we are doing with the freedom we have. I suppose what I am saying is more a call for determination.

The facilities are all in place for you to come to the place of prayer. To join regularly in small group bible study, to serve within the congregational life of the church, it's not that the opportunities are not there. I cannot do this for you even though I am deep in prayer for this congregation at this time. This is a call for us as a people at this new year in church life to become once again determined to follow after Jesus not to head back into our Jerichos to do what we please. I want to encourage you not to rise to leave this church today until you have taken time to ask God to give you the determination of Bartimaeus.

This man, Bartimaeus was a determined man not just in his overwhelming desire to meet with Jesus, but in his desire to allow Jesus to deal with him and then to follow Jesus wherever he went.

My friends it is time to leave Jericho.
God has freed you through faith.
Determine today how you are going to use your freedom.
For self or in service of the one who has set you free.

Gal. 5:13 ¹³You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. ¹⁴The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Let's pray together