

John Martin reflects on a blind ministry he encountered in India



Good news for the invisible blind

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The story of Jesus and the blind beggar of Jericho (Luke 18: 35-43) offers interesting insights into blindness and the complexities of ministry to blind persons, especially in places where they are ignored or treated as invisible. A blind person by instinct will resist cross conversation or being pushed aside.

So in Luke, when the blind man hears that Jesus is coming, he shouts at the top of his voice in hope of getting Jesus' attention. The crowd tell him to shut up but that's merely a trigger for him to shout 'all the more' (v 39). Then we see how Jesus does not assume that he knows for sure what the man wants. Jesus allows the man the dignity of speaking of his need in his own words (v 41).

This story has been very much on my mind following an all-too-brief visit to India where in the process I met the blind Pastor Pushparat and learnt of his Bangalore-based ministry, *New Vision*, that is giving hope and a quality of life to people who are treated as invisible.

'I lost my sight at the age of two following typhoid,' Pushparat told us. 'Typhoid is very contagious and at the time there was no treatment for it. What is more, Hindus are taught to be resigned to fate and there was little practical help or advice.' His parents, Hindu farmers, unable to read or write, could not agree what should be done and eventually they handed him over to a Catholic orphanage.

A security guard took an interest in Pushparat. They would read the Bible together and the guard taught him to pray to Jesus. He was musical and had a good singing voice so he took to begging in the streets. Then another Christian started to take an interest in

him. He made a personal commitment of faith and embarked on theological studies.

We heard the testimonies of several of the blind persons sitting on the floor. Most were from Hindu backgrounds. Gospel accounts of Jesus' dealings with blind persons form a large part of their reflection and songs. One said: 'In this world we have no silver, no gold. But by the blood of Jesus we have been bought.' Another song was based on John 9 where Jesus is asked whether it was the sin of the parents or the man himself that caused him to be born blind.

Pushparat explained: 'Healing in the story is not the most important thing. Jesus said this happened "so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.'" That is Pushparat's testimony too. 'I was a beggar. I used to collect a few coins by singing. Jesus has given a quality of life to me through the Cross.'

India, the biggest democracy in the world, is home to 1.2 billion people. They encompass vast extremes of wealth and poverty and speak 652 languages. No less than 427 tribal groups live on the social and geographic margins. In contrast 100 million of its people are middle class (that's twice the population of Britain) and the pundits are right about their capability for competing for European jobs.

What is clear, too, is that India is home to a flowering of indigenous Christian missions, propelled by revival and reaching out to the tribal areas. Through people like Pastor Pushparat it is also ministering to those who others would leave by the wayside, just as the crowd in Jericho would have done had Jesus not intervened.

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