

*Pentecost 21 (Proper 25 B)
October 25, 2009*

*St. Margaret's
Annapolis*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

It's not like any trip you or I have ever taken. There was no itinerary, no matching caps or T-shirts to identify the group, no reservations waiting at the end of the day. In fact, there was nothing that you or I would recognize as orderly or organized about this group or this trip.

That's not to say that it was *disorderly*, you understand. This was first century Palestine. As far as we're concerned, it might as well be another planet!

By now Jesus was traveling with a full-blown entourage. In addition to the disciples, they were surrounded with a sizable group which... in a way that is hard to describe in our Western terms... was moving together toward Jerusalem.

Some of the travelers may have come along out of curiosity, wondering if Jesus was going to lead some sort of coup or insurrection. Everybody knew, of course, that such a venture would be like a fly buzzing an elephant... but stranger this have happened. After all, they were passing right by the remains of Jericho; and didn't Joshua employ God's favor to bring down those mighty walls?

Some of the hangers-on may have been just that; gawkers, the merely curious. But some were surely true searchers, pilgrims, hoping to find proof that this Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One. They probably didn't even know what that would look like, but there was something about him. Something compelling. So they followed.

Anyway, this body of people, this organism made up of humanity, was on the move again just about the time Bartimaeus got wind of who it was they were all following. He had obviously heard about the miracles credited to Jesus; healing all kinds of things. The lame, the possessed... the blind. This might be his only opportunity. His last chance. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Throwing caution to the wind (along with any semblance of propriety) he began screaming at the top of his lungs: "JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!" Even for this crowd, he was way out of bounds.

Everybody in his vicinity tried to shut him up. But Bartimaeus must have felt his chance slipping away, so he shouted all the louder: "SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME!" This was a man who was not going to be ignored.

When Jesus stopped, stood still, and called for him... then the crowd shifted gears and encouraged Bartimaeus. "Take heart... he's calling you." So he jumped up – surely a sign of his desperation – and (we can only guess how) made his way to Jesus. And when Jesus asked what he wanted, he put it simply: "...let me see again."

We don't know much about Bartimaeus. This is the first and last time he appears in the gospels. By the sounds of it, he wasn't always blind. By his actions, he may not have been totally blind. We don't know. All we know is that this man... described as a blind beggar... did these things: he screamed blue bloody murder to get Jesus to hear him, and he asked directly for what he wanted. The last thing Mark says is that Bartimaeus followed Jesus on the way. That's all. Then we never hear of him again.

Nevertheless, there is much we can learn from this blind beggar. The first being that there are many ways to be blind.

I knew of a man I'll call "John," who was a very successful operator of a business that installed, removed, and cleaned underground storage tanks. He was an acknowledged expert on gas storage tanks. Despite his safety record, one day on the job there was an explosion, and he was burned over 60% of his body.

For days his whole face and head were wrapped in bandages, and all he could think about was how this explosion was a real "eye-opener." About how this was making him think about his life; how he worked too much and spent too little time with his family. He had already missed so much... he was going to slow down and spend more time with his grandchildren.

Behind those bandages, he could see how blessed he had been, and how much he had taken for granted. That accident may have burned his body, but it cured his blindness.

There are many ways to be blind:

- we can be blind to the imbalance in our lives – physically, financially, spiritually;
- we can be blind to the waste and destruction in which we participate, directly or indirectly;
- to the grinding poverty of so much of the world, even when the evidence of it is inescapable;
- we can be blind to the seductions of this world that entice us into thinking that money and things can make us safe and happy, or that our lives belong to us and that we're in control;
- we can even be blind to the needs of those closest to us;
- and sometimes we are blind to the blessings and bounty of this life.

All of that's to say that we can learn much from Bartimaeus. Perhaps we can also learn from him that the best approach to Jesus... to God... is the direct approach: *scream bloody murder and ask for what we want!*

In Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer, C.S. Lewis says, "It is no use to ask God with factitious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with B. We must lay before [God] what is in us, not what ought to be in us." Factitious earnestness. What a great – if obscure – phrase! But how often we do it: pray with false sincerity. Pray for what we think we're supposed to pray for... instead of what we long for in our heart-of-hearts.

One day a boy was watching a holy man praying on the banks of a river in India. When the holy man completed his prayer, the boy went over and asked him, "Will you teach me to pray?" The holy man studied the boy's face carefully, then he gripped the boy's head in his hands and plunged it into the water!

The boy struggled frantically, trying to free himself in order to breathe. Finally, the holy man released his hold and the boy emerged, gasping for air. He yelled, "What did you do that for?" The holy man said, "I just gave you your first lesson in prayer." "What do you mean?" asked the astonished boy. "Well," said the holy man, "when you long to pray as much as you longed to breathe when your head was under water – only then will I be able to teach you to pray."

Here is what I want to pray for, really *pray for*:

- that I learn to live with more balance, and to appreciate the abundance with which I am blessed;
- that I become more mindful of the needs of others, and contribute to the relief of the poor and the healing of the planet;
- that I hold the things of this world more lightly and that I learn how to be joyfully generous;

- and that I wake with gratitude, and live the day with gratitude, and fall asleep with breathless gratitude.

Surely Bartimaeus lived all the rest of his days full of gratitude. We can only imagine, since these six verses are all we know of him. But there is something universal about his story. Perhaps it is also my story; perhaps it is your story. In the verses of our lives, have we failed to notice the ways in which we are blind, the ways we have forgotten to see? Have we become too proper, too inhabited to pray, to really pray?

Come the day that Jesus walks by... come the day that the deepest longing of our hearts bursts forth, I hope that like Bartimaeus, we will be able to shout, to scream bloody murder: JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY...

Amen.

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