

Mark 10:46-52

Sunday, October 25, 2015 Year B

Our First Reading today is from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet to the “House of David”, the Kingdom of Judah, just prior to and during the time of the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah was not very popular with the Kings of Judah. He was constantly calling on them to repent and return to the ways of the Lord, or else bad things were going to happen to them. Well, they failed to repent, and bad things did happen to them; bad things like Jerusalem being conquered by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, and the Jewish people being taken away into exile. However, despite all this, in today’s reading from Jeremiah, we actually hear a message of hope. Jeremiah’s words are taken from a letter he wrote to those in exile, telling them to have hope, because the time will come when the LORD will bring a joyful remnant back “from the North Country, and gather them from the farthest parts of the Earth, among them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her who is in travail, together; a great company, they shall return here.”

The fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy can be seen in today’s Gospel. We are told Jesus is leaving Jericho, on His way to His ultimate destination of Jerusalem; on His way to the Cross. Along with Jesus we are told are His disciples and a “sizeable crowd”. In the midst of this crowd we meet Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, just as we were told would happen by Jeremiah. This connection between these two readings reinforces the lordship of Jesus Christ. Together they tell us who He is; that He is the long awaited “Son of David”. The one who is gathering the remnant of Israel, bringing them back from their exile among the nations. Within this context we have this fascinating meeting between Jesus and Bartimaeus.

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The story takes place on the road heading out of Jericho. Jericho is an ancient city which archaeological work has shown to have been occupied by humans as far back as 9000 B.C. The city is biblically significant because it was there that the Israelites, after wandering for forty-years in the wilderness, had their first battle upon entering into the Promised Land. Joshua led the Israelite conquest of Jericho, and by following God's plan, by trusting in Him, they were able to bring down the walls of Jericho, and take the city. So when we hear about Jericho in the Scriptures we should think of a place where God's will is resisted, a place in opposition to God.

Bartimaeus is blind, and he survives by begging from the travelers who pass him by. His situation is difficult. He is not self-sufficient, and his existence hinges on the charity of others. In a very real sense, Bartimaeus is a man who understands mercy. He hears a commotion and senses a large number of people approaching. We can assume that he must ask somebody, "What is going on?" That person tells him that Jesus of Nazareth is coming.

We can tell by his reaction to this news he has heard of Jesus. Someone must have spoken to him previously about this country Rabbi from Nazareth, who was working these amazing miracles; casting out demons, healing the sick and paralyzed, and even healing the blind. We can wonder, did they tell Bartimaeus that Jesus was a prophet? A miraculous healer? Or maybe they told him that He is the one they have been waiting for; the heir to King David, the Messiah. We can also imagine what these stories may have meant to Bartimaeus. We can imagine that they would have filled him with hope, hope that maybe he too, could be healed. We could also imagine that hope being continuously crushed by the reality of his situation; of his being a blind beggar, who had no realistic chance of ever catching up to this wonder-working preacher, who seemed to be moving throughout all of Israel.

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But today is different. Today Bartimaeus hears that it is Jesus approaching, coming near to him, approaching on his road! We can now imagine that fine line in Bartimaeus' mind between his hope in Jesus and his despair of ever seeing Him, that fine line, now becomes a razor's edge. Jesus is approaching, and in a few more steps could be the realization of Bartimaeus' dream, his hope of healing and new life. But what if Jesus doesn't stop? In another moment, and in another few steps, Jesus will be past him, and with Him goes all of Bartimaeus' hope. The situation is desperate. In his desperation he does the only thing he can; he cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" The good people around him tell him to be silent. Bartimaeus is that embarrassing street person who shouts out inappropriate things. We cringe at their words and pretend not to hear them. But in his desperation, Bartimaeus ignores their rebuke and only shouts out all the more, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me."

Then it happens, Jesus stops, and tells the people around Him to, "Call him." And they do, saying, "Take courage; get up, He is calling you." They don't have to tell him twice. He springs up, throws off his cloak, and comes to Jesus. Then Jesus does something strange. He asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Now Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted. He knew he was blind. Jesus read people's hearts; He knew Bartimaeus wanted to see. For some reason Jesus wanted him to articulate his desire. He wanted him to express his faith; express his belief that Jesus could heal him. When Bartimaeus does this, he is healed immediately. And he receives more than just his physical healing, he receives his salvation. We know this because Jesus tells him, "Go your way, your faith has saved you."

Now this is a wonderful story, but what is it that we can take from this story? How might it matter to our lives today? Bartimaeus is a blind beggar who is stuck in Jericho with no way out. He has a problem he cannot solve. He cannot make himself well through his own power. I

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propose to you the great truth that Bartimaeus teaches us, is that in the spiritual life, we are all blind beggars, stuck in Jericho – that place that represents all those things that are in opposition to God; dysfunction, violence, hatred, selfishness – in a word, sin. We are stuck in sin and we are blind to God’s way. We have a problem that we cannot solve by our own abilities. This is a concept that is particularly hard for many of us here to deal with. The idea that there is a problem we cannot solve comes across as almost a challenge to us. What do you mean there is something I can’t do? Many of us here pride ourselves on our ability to solve difficult and challenging problems. You could even say our community exists because of the abilities of the people who live here to solve difficult problems. The people who live here possess the drive and ability needed to take on the most difficult technical problems facing this nation.

However, the problem of sin is a different kind of problem. Bishop Robert Barron tells us that sin is a problem of the will and the mind; a problem that causes the great gifts of our intellect and our will to become twisted and perverse. Now, if the mind and the will are the problem, then having more intellect, more mind, and more desire, more will, is never going to get us to a solution. Christianity is a salvation religion. This means that Christianity proposes a solution to the problem of sin, and to its devastating consequence, death; two problems which are beyond our abilities to solve. This is where Bartimaeus shows us his great insight. He shows us that we are not spiritually self-sufficient, and that the only way out of Jericho, the only way out of sin and death, is through the person of Jesus Christ.

Bartimaeus cries out, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” It is a perfect prayer. A prayer that recognizes who Jesus is, and a prayer that asks for exactly what we need. Bartimaeus also shows us that when we realize the depth of our need, when we reach that point of desperation, the point of crying out to God for mercy, we shouldn’t expect a whole lot of support

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from the people around us. Acknowledging our blindness, our weakness, is not going to gain us any popularity in a culture that prizes success and achievement. But Bartimaeus shows us not to give up; he shows us how to persevere in prayer; how to ignore those who are embarrassed by our weakness, and who just want us to go away.

How is our prayer rewarded? Jesus stops and calls us to Him. Being called by Jesus is a very important concept in our faith. The original Greek word for Church means “those who are called out”. Everyone here today has been called here by God. Just like somebody had to tell Bartimaeus Jesus was calling him, there was someone in each of our lives who invited us to faith in Jesus Christ. Whether it was our parents, a spouse, a friend – someone brought us here, brought us to this place where we can encounter Jesus. They brought us here with the sure hope that by our encountering the person of Jesus Christ, our eyes would be opened, and our lives would be changed. Bartimaeus shows us this encounter is meant to be very personal. He shows us that Jesus wants to bring us each into a relationship with Him. Jesus invites us into that relationship by asking each of us, “What do you want me to do for you?” How will you answer Him? Doesn’t He already know what we need? Yes, but He still wants to hear our expression of faith; He wants to hear us make our own free choice for Him. He knows that we need to express that faith; He knows that we need to make that choice for Him from our own free will.

Bartimaeus’ journey did not end that day he received his sight and his salvation. The last line of today’s Gospel says, “Immediately he received his sight and followed Him on the way.” Neither does our journey end the day we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord and Salvation. However, this moment of honest acknowledgment of our desperate need for Jesus’ mercy, is a critical one in our spiritual life, because it is from that moment on, that we can begin to live out a life of discipleship; we can begin to live out a life consecrated to following Him on the Way.