

TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

Pentecost 23 Year B

Job 42:1-6,10-17; Ps 34:1-8,(19-22); Heb 7:23-28; Mk 10:46-52 Gladstone 28/10/2018

A young priest went one day to seek enlightenment from a wise old monk. “Father, I have come to you seeking enlightenment.” “Well, then,” the sage directed, “for the first exercise of your retreat, go into the courtyard, tilt back your head, stretch out your arms and wait until I come for you.” The priest went out and did as the monk had said. As soon as he stretched out his arms and tilted back his head, it began to rain. And rain. And rain. And rain.

Finally, the monk came for him. “Well, Father, have you been enlightened today?” “Are you serious?” the priest said in disgust. “I’ve been standing here with my head up in the rain for more than an hour. I’m soaking wet! I feel like a fool!” The monk said, “Well, Father, for the first day of a retreat, that sounds like great enlightenment to me.”

Our text today from Mark’s account of the gospel, serves as a dramatic contrast to the past two lectionary readings from Mark’s account of the gospel, from which I preached over the last couple of weeks.

Two weeks ago we had the man who had kept all of the commandments from his youth and who had many possessions—an obvious sign in the first century that he had been blessed by God—but, as we discover, he is not able to part with his possessions—and as a consequence is not able to follow Jesus. In our text for today, we have a man who is blind and a beggar—obvious signs in the first century that he was a “sinner” and not blessed by God. However, the blind-beggar, throws off his cloak (v. 50)—perhaps his *only* possession, and *is* able to follow Jesus.

Last week we had James and John seeking positions of honour at Jesus’ side when he enters his glory. In our text for today, we have a man who is sitting by the side of the road—we might we say, “he was sitting in the gutter”—crying for mercy (or pity). Now this was certainly not a position of honour. What contrasts we find in these texts.

Prior to these two readings, way back in Mark chapter 8, we find the account of Jesus healing another blind man by touching his eyes twice, after which, we are told, he was able to see everything clearly—a story that is unique to Mark. These two stories of the healing of blind men—the one in chapter 8 and the one we have today of the healing of Bartimaeus—form, what we might regard as bookends to that whole section in Mark’s gospel regarding discipleship.(8:22-10:52).

In today’s reading, the blind man, Bartimaeus, unlike James and John in the previous story, humbles himself. He flings himself at Jesus who is passing by and begs for healing. For reasons only known to himself, he believed in the mercy and compassion of Jesus—

and in Jesus' power to heal. Whether they subsequently realised it, Bartimaeus was a good model for the apostles, who had shown themselves greedy for power and also very hard-headed and hard-hearted when it came to believing what Jesus had been saying to them..

In this passage we have the example of the disciples who did not fully understand, or see the way of Jesus, and yet the healed and saved blind man does. Lamar Williamson, in his commentary on Mark, has this brief statement. He says that "...the cure of Bartimaeus is climactic in the sense that its outcome marks the goal of this Gospel in the life of its readers: He followed Jesus 'on the way.'" This contrast between Bartimaeus and the disciples is also highlighted by answers to Jesus' question: "What do you want me to do for you?" which he asks twice in this chapter (10:36, 51). The two disciples want positions of honour. The blind man wants to see.

Bartimaeus is a good example for us as to the enthusiasm we must have in embracing the faith and in our willingness to carry out the words of Jesus. Helen Keller is probably one of the most outstanding examples of someone who, though blind and deaf and dumb, showed utmost faith. She graduated from college and once said, "Better to be blind and see with your heart than to have two good eyes and see nothing."

This question also underlines the importance of us getting our deepest desires straight. What do we want Jesus to do for us?

The apostles were having a hard time seeing with either their eyes *or* their heart. I guess we shouldn't be too hard on them. Would we have been any different? Would we have had any more enlightenment than they had—or at least had any access to—in spite of all the things Jesus was saying to them—especially about his impending death?

This last healing in Mark underlines the kind of follower Jesus is looking for. In fact, Bartimaeus even cries out that Jesus is the "Son of David," meaning the messiah who is to come to save the Jewish people. It's interesting to note that Jesus doesn't forbid Bartimaeus to proclaim him in this way, as Jesus forbade so many others before. And there's a very good reason why. Jesus was going up to Jerusalem to die in a few days, and it was time for his followers to begin to proclaim him as the suffering messiah Jesus intended people to know him as. The time for full revelation of who Jesus was had come.

Jesus' meeting with blind Bartimaeus highlights that contrast I mentioned earlier, between the disciples' blindness and God's gift of faith needed to receive spiritual sight. Discipleship is ultimately a gift of God's grace. So, by placing Jesus' healing of blind people like bookends, at the beginning and end of this section on discipleship, Mark tries to make this clear to all of us.

Like Bartimaeus, we move from the sidelines to follow Jesus on the way when we receive the gift of spiritual sight. Maybe our personal story is less sensational than that of Bartimaeus, but we may well have a common experience with John Newton, the notorious 19th century English slave trader, who had a conversion experience which dramatically changed his life. As a result, he became a priest in the Church of England and devoted his life to serving others. Newton went on to write many hymns, but there is one in particular that we're all very familiar with: *"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, who saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."* That is true enlightenment.

Who then can be saved? That's the question the disciples posed to Jesus in the passage we looked at two weeks ago, when Jesus stated that, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (10:25) Today, Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Today's reading is an example of "who can be saved" and how one is saved. With humans—whether a rich man entering the kingdom of God or a blind man seeing again—it's impossible. With God, however, all things are possible (10:27).

Even though we have been gifted with physical sight, sometimes we are, like the disciples, as blind as Bartimaeus when it comes to using our "eyes of faith". We fail to "see" God's hand at work in the things that happen around us. But, like Bartimaeus, we must never give up our faith, our hope, or our understanding that God will take care of us in his own time. Bartimaeus waited a long time by that lonely road until the day Jesus passed by. But when he did, he was ready, and he wouldn't let Jesus go until his prayer had been answered.

Sometimes, we may wait a long time for Jesus to pass by us and answer our prayers. But the story of Bartimaeus tells us that our faith must persevere until he does, or all that will be left to us is despair. Perhaps in times of adversity we need to remember people like Helen Keller, who didn't let her handicap overwhelm her. We need to have faith that God will answer our prayers, and persistence in the face of disappointments, obstacles and handicaps—these are valuable lessons which we can learn from today's gospel reading and carry over into our daily lives.

Another important aspect to this story is found in verse 47, where Mark writes, "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'" This whole miracle scene begins with someone telling the blind man—an outsider—that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was passing by.

We do well to remember and understand that Jesus' call to the blind man was actually mediated through human agents. And Jesus tells others, "Call him here." They do and he responds. We see here the combination of both human and divine activities that work together to produce the miracle of sight for Bartimaeus.

So where do we see ourselves in this story? Well, we should see ourselves both as the blind man—in need of the divine miracle so that we can be saved and follow Jesus on the way—and as members of the crowd who need to see the blind man in a new and different way. As Christians, we need to be able to share the news about Jesus with all those people who are on the "side of the way"—the outsiders—whether they be in the gutter physically or in the gutter in some other metaphoric way—mentally, spiritually, emotionally or some other way.

Do we believe that Jesus calls them to his side? If so, we need to share the news. We need to be like those in our passage for today, who called out to Bartimaeus, saying, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you," and certainly not like those who sternly told him to be quiet. Do we believe that Jesus has called *us* to his side? It means leaving everything behind and following Jesus—which from Jericho means an uphill road to the cross in Jerusalem.

Well, Jesus *is* calling you—not only those who participate in some way in our life of worship and service—whether they be the minister, elders, Church Councillors, or those in some other form of leadership. You. Each one of you. And when Jesus asks you what you want of him, say with the blind beggar, "My teacher, let me see again." (Mk 10:50). Lord, let me look for "lost horizons." Let my eyes open not only on beauty but on ugliness, on the poor and the powerless, on the ailing and the aged, on the hatred and bitterness that eats away at human hearts.

Let us see where we can love without limit, without measure or calculation. Not some fluffy or flimsy kind of loving. No, to be genuinely Christian, we must be like Christ in loving—who loved even unto death—death on a cross. So, let us experience the kind of love where loving may not only make us uncomfortable but may in fact become sacrificial, cause pain and make you want to run away. Christ, our Lord, is not asking you to simply return love for love. He asks you to take the lead in loving. Blind beggars all, let us beg the Master today, now, simply to let us see.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.