

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, there was a blind beggar, Bartimaeus sitting by the roadside. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out: "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!"

Mark 10, 46-52



There is certain irony in this story in the fact that a blind beggar has been able to “see” in Jesus something that the “seeing” Apostles have been completely unable to grasp. Bartimaeus has been able to recognise Jesus as a man of compassion, intent on serving needy people like him. How he managed to learn about Jesus is anybody’s guess. But, even to this day, people who beg on streets seem to have acute awareness of what goes on around them, despite the disabilities they have to manage. No matter how he had come to learn about Jesus, Bartimaeus was smart enough to find a spot to do his begging on the side of the Jericho road - a road frequented by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem. As pilgrims heading for holy places are often in high spirits, there was a better than even chance that such pilgrims would be generous with donations to the beggars they encountered. When Bartimaeus heard the crowd around him saying that Jesus and his followers were on the way up to Jerusalem, he was determined not to miss his opportunity of something even better than a handout. His determination was evidenced in the fact that, as an “unclean” person, made so by his disability, he did not keep his distance from the gathering crowd. Then he broke societal expectations by screaming out at the top of his voice. And those physically close to him responded by voicing their disapproval.

What is noticeable about how Mark continued the story is the fact that he used the word “call” three times in close succession, the same word as Jesus had used when he called each of the disciples. The crowd that had just tried to silence Bartimaeus turned and called him to come forward in response to Jesus’ direction: “Call him over.” And Mark continued the story with: “So, they called the blind man over, telling him as they did: ‘You have nothing to fear from him! Get up! He is calling you!’” (Mark 10, 49).

From here on, there was no stopping Bartimaeus. Those in the crowd, who had previously blocked him, opened the way for him, even encouraging him to come forward. And he didn’t need to be called twice. Moreover, Mark captured the excitement of the moment: “Throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus sprang up and ran to Jesus” (Mark 10, 50). And he didn’t miss a beat. For when Jesus asked him what he wanted, he answered without hesitation: “Rabbi, I want to see.” The exchange between the two could not have been more precise and direct: “Go, your faith has made you well”, Jesus replied. And Mark concluded with similar precision: “Immediately, he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way” (Mark 10, 52).

This story stands in stark contrast to the picture Mark has given of the Apostles in the previous couple of chapters of his Gospel. He presents them as a group of competitive, ambitious, flawed human beings who have repeatedly failed to see, hear and understand Jesus’ mission and his invitation to them to participate in it, even to the extent of accompanying him on his journey to Jerusalem and Calvary and imitating him by taking up their own crosses. But, while we can see this in the retrospective of Jesus’ resurrection, it is important that we understand that the Apostles’ expectations of the Messiah were shaped by a culture that had grown up over centuries, a culture that was convinced that the Messiah would deliver freedom, status, power and wealth to God’s

Chosen People. It is only in the stories of Jesus' encounters with his disciples following his resurrection that we come to learn something of the mystery of how the peace and forgiveness that Jesus offers can heal these flawed men and lead them to understand and embrace his call to follow him.

As we hear this story of how Bartimaeus was healed by Jesus on his life-ending journey to Jerusalem, we can focus on the fact this was the last miracle that Jesus performed, and, in the process, miss that this is also a story of a call - an invitation by Jesus to follow him. Moreover, this story has all the elements that belong to the stories of Jesus' calling of Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him.

First of all, Jesus does the calling. In response, Peter, Andrew, James and John immediately drop their nets - the symbol of their occupation - and follow Jesus. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak - the piece of clothing he spread on the ground to collect the coins tossed to him, the symbol of how he eked out a livelihood - and he follows Jesus "on the way" - an expression carefully chosen by Mark because the term "people of the Way" was used to describe followers of Jesus well before they were called "Christians". It was some years before the missionary work of Barnabas and Paul caught the attention of Greeks and Cypriots living in the city of Antioch. They swelled the numbers of those following the "way of Jesus", and it was here in Antioch that "the disciples were called Christians for the first time" (Acts 11, 26). There is little doubt, then, that Mark was identifying Bartimaeus as the stand-out model of genuine discipleship of Jesus. It was only after his resurrection, when Jesus breathed his spirit of peace, healing and forgiveness on them, that the other disciples caught up with Bartimaeus.

The relevance of all this for us is that we, too, all suffer some level of blindness in our efforts to see and understand Jesus and to grasp what it really means to be his disciples. We are all flawed and in need of healing; we are all slow and reluctant to take up the crosses that come our way; we've all had it rich and poor, but prefer it rich; we all like status and power and know that we sometimes set our sights on them. But let's not fall into a depression because we sometimes fall short of what we want to be. John Shea, a noted American story-teller and exponent of the theology of story points out how our flaws can be a step on our way to God: "Our blind and begging condition makes us ready, but it is the call of Jesus that raises us off the ground" (The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Eating with the Bridegroom (Year B), Collegeville Press, MN. 2004)

So, Mark presents Bartimaeus to us as a model of hope and encouragement in our journey of discipleship. This blind man is a reminder to us that all those whom we encounter - the weak, the competent, the welcoming and the flawed - are a potential source of blessing. But, as Rachel Remen, psychologist and spiritual writer observes: "A blessing is not something that one person gives another. A blessing is a moment of meeting, a certain kind of relationship in which both people involved remember and acknowledge their true nature and worth, and strengthen what is whole in one another" (Rachael Naomi Remen, My Grandfather's Blessings, Riverhead Books, N.Y. 2000).