

The Healing of Bartimaeus

Reflections for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Today's readings, especially the Gospel, are very powerful. Before I comment on the Gospel, I'd like to begin with a comment on a verse from the second reading from Hebrews:

"Beset by human weakness, the priest is able to deal patiently with others."

This is a reference to the high priests of Israel whom the author states is "able to deal patiently with others because of his own weaknesses". Hopefully, I can say that about myself and you can say it about yourself. Sometimes a person will say to me, "I need to go to confession, but I am a bit embarrassed by my sins." Or, sometimes people think that they will shock me with their sins. My usual response is, "There is nothing that you will tell me that I haven't done myself or that I couldn't do, given the right set of circumstances." Do you believe that about yourself? Our own weaknesses should make us more compassionate. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Sometimes, for conscious or usually unconscious reasons, we may rail against the very sin that we are guilty of. A good example of this was a famous television evangelist who railed against sexual sins only to be caught himself soliciting a prostitute.

On the other hand, our own weaknesses should not cause us to water down the Gospel. Every preacher knows, or should know, that he often preaches a message that he does not practice perfectly. The great St. Francis de Sales used to say; *"Woe to me if I only preach what I practice."* All of us, including the clergy, are always trying to catch up on the Gospel that we are preaching.

The Healing of Bartimaeus

In today's Gospel, we encounter a blind beggar who becomes a disciple of Jesus. At this time in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is teaching on *discipleship*. He is having a tough time of it because the disciples are a dense or blind lot. They just don't get it. (Mark presents the disciples in a denser light than all the other evangelists.) When Jesus speaks about himself as a *suffering* Messiah, the disciples are busy jockeying for key places in his new Kingdom. In this way, they show themselves to be blinder than Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

Now lets look at several parts of this beautiful and profound story.

"He gives expression to his pain"

When Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is coming down the road, he begins to cry out " *Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.*" In crying out thus, Bartimaeus gives expression to his pain and suffering. Commenting on this verse in today's Gospel, Fr. Dennis McBride sees in Bartimaeus cry a wonderful example of what is called in the scriptures the *"Prayer of Lamentation"* *Prayers of Lamentation are cries from the heart, shouts of suffering, groans of anguish, screams for help. They are written on a bed of pain, but they express the hope that things will change, that God will listen. Lamentation is the voice of suffering:*

*Have mercy on me, Lord, I have no strength....
I am exhausted with my groaning;
every night I drench my pillow with tears;
I bedew my bed with weeping.
My eyes waste away with grief;
I have grown old surrounded by my foes. (Prob)*

The expression of suffering is intended to be more than just self-expression; it is made out of the hope that things can change. Lamentation, therefore, is not pessimistic; it refuses to remain powerless and passive, so it expresses its longing for change. The Prayer of Lamentation makes a bridge between silent endurance and change.

Bartimaeus' cry stresses the importance of giving expression to our prayer. Bartimaeus could have said: *"God already*

knows my need. I don't need to bother him." Or he could have said to himself: *"Jesus is too busy to be concerned about a nobody like me."* But he did neither. Instead he verbally expressed his need to Jesus. We might ask ourselves: How easy or hard is it for us to give expression to our pain? To what extent is it our tendency to suffer in silence?

The Uncaring and Oppressive Crowd

Mark continues his story with the comment, *"and many rebuked him telling him to be quiet."* How insensitive and uncaring! Some of these people could have been Jesus' disciples. They were totally blind to the pain and suffering of this poor man. Most likely, they all knew him. He was a familiar part of the landscape, just as many of us see some of the homeless people who walk our streets on a daily basis. The crowd represents all those who do not want the suffering to express their plight. Hearing the cry of the poor may mean unjust structures may need to be changed. Listening to the cry of the suffering may demand a change in me that I may be resistant to make.

But Bartimaeus continues to yell out

We might think that Bartimaeus might have been intimidated by the oppressive voice of those who said: *"Be quiet" "Shut up."* But the crowds attempt to quiet Bartimaeus, seem to only motivate him to cry out all the more: *"Jesus, have pity on me."*

This is a wonderful example of a man professing faith in a hostile atmosphere. How many of us would have the courage to continue professing our faith if those around us were rebuking us? How many of us would have the courage to continue shouting *"unjust, unjust"* if we were being threatened with retaliation? How many of us tend to be very private with our faith because we are ashamed of it and do not want to cause waves in the workplace or in our social circle?

Jesus stops.

Jesus, like the crowd could have ignored the cry of the poor man. Jesus could have said: *"call my office for an appointment."* But he didn't. He *"stopped the procession"* and allowed the cry of the poor to reach his ears and heart. I think of all those who work with the poor inside and outside the parish, how they too have allowed the cry of the poor to touch their hearts. I thank God for you.

Jesus' Concern Raises the Crowds Consciousness

When Jesus said, *"call over the blind man"* the crowd's attitude changed. They, who a few moments ago rebuked the blind beggar, now say to him, *take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you."* The compassion of Jesus seems to have rubbed off on the crowd. The good example of others has great power to change our perceptions and attitudes. Or, we might say the attitude and behavior of Jesus helped to awaken the consciousness of the crowd. They too were being enlightened. They who previously were blind to the plight of the blind beggar were awakened to his need. Perhaps, over the years the good example of others opened our eyes about the sacredness of human life, the immorality of racism and cheating, and the plight of the poor at home and abroad.

In the journey of life, other people, including our church family, can be a *help* or *hindrance* to our faith life. People who practice a rigid, legalistic Christianity will not attract us to Christ. People who say one thing and practice another will not attract us to Christ. On the other hand, individuals and a church family that is hospitable, faith-filled, caring, enthusiastic about its faith life will attract us.

What do you want me to do for you?

With the help and encouragement of a changed crowd, the blind man comes to Jesus. Jesus asks him: *"What do you want me to do for you?"* If Jesus asked us that question how would we respond? Jesus's question is a good one for us to take time to pray about.

"Master, I want to see."

Jesus knew well what Bartimaeus needed, but he wanted Bartimaeus to give expression to his need, to *name* his need. We too need to give expression to our needs. Fortunately, very few of us need *physical sight*, but we can be sure that all of us are in need of *spiritual sight* and *insight*. We can always assume that each of us suffer from spiritual blindness. There is 'stuff' that we should see that we are blind to. We may be blind to our own goodness or the goodness of others. We may be blind to our own sin or to the needs of others. We may be blind to the meaning of the scriptures or church teachings. Hence, a regular prayer of ours should be: "*Lord, that I may see, Lord that I may see myself as you see me. Lord that I may see your plan for my life*". I would appreciate it if you would often pray for me and our parish staff, that we may *see God's plan* for our parish.

Bartimaeus receives sight

Receiving *physical* sight must have been a wonderful gift but receiving the gift of faith is even still more wonderful. While all those around Jesus were blind as to who he was, Bartimaeus received the gift to see. As you know, Milton the great poet, became blind during his life. After he came to accept his blindness he said his being was filled with the light of God.

"And he followed Jesus."

This means that Bartimaeus became a disciple of Jesus. This is the constant call of Jesus to each of us to become his faithful disciple and all that that involves.