

Homily for Sunday, Oct. 24, 2021 – 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time



This gospel passage was one of the most important scripture stories told to those seeking baptism in the Church in the first few centuries. It has lots to teach us as well. Remember, only adults were baptized during the first 350 years of the Church's existence. Back then, what they called the Catechumenate--and what we call the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults--catechists told those seeking baptism the story of

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. You could not become a Christian, unless a catechist guided you into this story, guided you out of this story, and showed you how this story applied to your life.

Followers of Jesus in the first few centuries did not call themselves "Church" nor "Christians". They called themselves people of "The Way." It's not a fluke that today's gospel account ends by saying: ***Immediately the man regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way.*** To be on the way meant you were a member of the Church, a follower of Jesus who already told us that he is "the Way", the Truth, and the Life. Before baptism, you were considered as a person on the side of the road, like Bartimaeus at the beginning of the story. After baptism, after a genuine encounter with Christ, you were considered as a person on the way, like Bartimaeus at the end of the story.

Notice Jesus forces no one to choose the way, the church, unless it is what that person desires in their heart. He imposes nothing, only invites. (I wonder where our relationship with Indigenous People and with others would be if we had learned this lesson from Jesus, the lesson of inviting and not imposing). Even though he is the Son of God, Jesus respects peoples' autonomy in choosing to follow him or not. One way or the other, Jesus is always about freedom. He asks Bartimaeus, ***"What do you want me to do for you?"*** It is exactly the same question Jesus asked of James and John in last Sunday's gospel reading. You may recall James and John--

when Jesus said, “what do you want me to do for you?” -- asked for places of power and privilege when Jesus comes into his glory. Bartimaeus, does not ask for such things but says, **“let me see again.”** James and John are on the way, but it is not the way of Jesus. These brothers are on the way of “upward mobility” or we might say, the way of climbing the corporate ladder, the way of success, power, and prestige. It is a path that avoids suffering and sacrifice at all cost. Bartimaeus is also on the way, the way of “downward mobility,” that is, the way of Jesus, the way of powerlessness.

In Mark’s gospel, this story occurs as Jesus is leaving Jericho and about to enter Jerusalem, where he will suffer and die. This is Jesus’ own path of downward mobility. Anyone who tries to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem gets set straight. By going ahead of us into Jerusalem—the place of suffering--Jesus will already be there when we get there. Can you believe that in your darkest moments you don’t have to search for Jesus in that darkness but that you are met there by One who already inhabits that place? And in that dark place, that place of struggle, he greets you with the words, “Do not be afraid, for I have overcome the world.” The past two Sunday readings from the Letter to the Hebrews say that **“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness”** but **“one who is subject to the same weakness that we are subject to.”**

On Friday, when I asked inmates in Dorchester to comment on the Bartimaeus story, one of them said, and I paraphrase, “What I like about Jesus is that he never passes by the little guy, the poor, the powerless, the forgotten, those on the side of the road.” Not bad for someone whose resume includes not a single credit in theology but only credit for time served.

When you suffer any kind of pain—physical, mental, emotional-- you understand the Bartimaeus story. Only great pain or great love brings us to God. When you try to avoid or leapfrog your pain, as James and John tried to, the Bartimaeus story gets reduced to a story of a poor soul and a do-gooder. Nothing more.

Perhaps when Bartimaeus says, **“let me see again”** he is really saying, “Teacher, let me see as you see.” Let me see and let me hear the people on the roadside who are often invisible and voiceless because **they are sternly ordered to be quiet.** Without the ability to express ourselves, including our pain, the journey towards wholeness and healing never gets traveled. Jesus hears the voice of Bartimaeus and

everyone who has ever suffered, including you and me. He not only hears Bartimaeus's voice over the crowd but also acknowledges the power of healing that was within him already. He tells Bartimaeus, "***your faith has made you well.***" Jesus doesn't impose something on Bartimaeus; he doesn't put faith in Bartimaeus that isn't already there. It is Bartimaeus's faith--his request to see--that causes the miracle. To see is to: have faith, to get it, to finally understand. When we say, "Do you see what I'm talking about?" it means, "do you understand where I'm coming from?" Bartimaeus gets it. He understands what it means to follow Jesus. He knows that the way up is only granted to those who are willing to first go down. The glory is only granted to those first willing to drink the cup of suffering. Bartimaeus has had a lifetime of suffering, a lifetime of begging, a lifetime of darkness, a lifetime of downward mobility. He is ready for the glory about to be bestowed upon him.

It's interesting, that while still blind—before his sight is restored—***he threw off his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.*** Obviously, it is not physical sight that helps us navigate our way to Jesus. It is the inner eyes, the eyes of faith that moves us in the direction of Jesus, the direction of healing. And you only need faith the size of a mustard seed, and you're on the way. Or, as St. Paul says, "***We walk by faith and not by sight.***"

Before Bartimaeus moves in the direction of Jesus, he first throws off his cloak. The cloak is the most important thing a beggar has. It's what he lays down before people in the hopes that one or two of them will toss him a coin. The cloak is his covering by day and his blanket by night. Without his cloak, he has nothing. It is the most valuable thing for a beggar. What a risk for Bartimaeus to leave everything behind in order to follow Jesus. He wasn't just leaving a tattered cloak behind, he was leaving his old self behind and embracing a new way of life. It was as transformative as a caterpillar leaving its cocoon behind and being reborn as a butterfly. Once a butterfly, the old trappings are of no use.

As I said at the beginning, those seeking membership in the early Church, were to discern whether they were ready to leave everything behind, to sell all they had in order to acquire a hidden treasure. Before they entered the water of baptism, the catechumens--then and now--are wrapped in a burial cloak and they wait by the roadside. When they are called by name, they throw off their cloak, enter the baptism font and become as vulnerable as Bartimaeus became 2000 years ago.

They die in the waters of the baptismal font, the tomb of the Church. When they emerge, they are a new creation and so are given a new cloak—a white cloak, the sign of their new life in Christ.

If Jesus asked you, “What do you want me to do for you?” how would you answer? What would you be willing to leave behind for the Great Adventure?

Fr. Phil