



A Cry from the Crowd

Sunday, October 27, 2024

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Gospel Lesson, Mark 10:46-52

⁴⁶ Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁸ Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” ⁵⁰ Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

⁵¹ “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

⁵² “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Sermon, “A Cry from the Crowd”

We’re on the verge of four major holidays in just 63 days. First there’s Halloween, then five days later it’s Election Day, although I’m not counting that as a holiday. Then three weeks later it’s Thanksgiving and less than a month later it’s Christmas followed by New Year’s.

On the cusp of this holiday stretch, the Revised Common Lectionary introduces us to the story of blind Bartimaeus. But even a quick look at the context tells us this is really a spring story, one that

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should come on the cusp of Lent. For in it, Jesus and his followers embark on a journey to Jerusalem for what would be that fateful last Passover in which Jesus would be arrested, illegally tried, and ultimately crucified on the cruel cross of Calvary.

By all accounts, Bartimaeus lived in Jericho, some 18 miles from Jerusalem. You may recall that Jericho was the site of one of the most stunning, miraculous victories in the history of Israel. Jericho is located on the west bank of the Jordan River, and it was the first city the Israelites encountered and conquered when they first set foot on the soil of the Promised Land. The Hebrews marched around the city of Jericho for a week until the last day when “the walls came a tumblin’ down” like a Jenga tower. They rescued Rahab the innkeeper, a woman with a bad reputation mixed with faith in the God of the Hebrews.

After those walls came tumblin’ down, Joshua pronounced a curse on the city: “Cursed before the Lord is the one who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho” (Joshua 6:26).

Perhaps because of that curse, there were two cities named Jericho: the old city in ruins and just a mile away, the new city of Jericho; that’s where Herod the Great built a lavish winter palace.¹ That lavish resort stood in contrast to the poverty of Bartimaeus.

Imagine you’re Bartimaeus. Most of your neighbors have either left or will soon leave for their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. You remember what it was like to go to the City of David, to see the temple where atonement for sin was made; to behold the beauty of the temple and see the sacred outfits of the priests. But that was before you lost your sight. You hadn’t made that pilgrimage in years. And today, an 18-mile walk was simply too much for a blind man.

On the other hand, people are on the move, traveling to Jerusalem for Passover. It’s the perfect opportunity for you to ask for alms. So early that morning you set out to find a place along the road where you could sit and beg. You walk ever so cautiously, surrounded by neighbors who are afraid to help you. They just don’t want to get involved. But you’re used to that; you’ve been on your own for years. Nonetheless, you follow their voices, indistinct though they may be because there are so many layers of conversation as the crowd swells.

Along with the voices of neighbors and strangers, you hear the bleating of sheep, the occasional lowing of cattle, and the braying of donkeys. You can smell them, too. Some of the animals will be sold at market; others will be offered for sacrifice, with a portion burned as a holy offering to Yahweh, and a portion given to the priests in accordance with the Law of Moses. A few will be brought back home.

Finally, you reach the road. You lift your face to the sun to feel its warmth on your cheek. If you feel that warmth, you move on until you find a spot where the sun doesn’t burn quite as hot; then you know you’ve found a shady spot beneath a tree. You take a deep breath: the air smells sweet and fruity, like figs. Too bad it’s too early to harvest figs, or a fresh treat might drop into your lap.

You spread out your cloak and sit down. You certainly didn’t need your cloak to keep you warm; it’s a warm spring day. In fact, it’s always warm—or hot—in Jericho. The only reason you brought your cloak was so you could spread it out on the ground in front of you that it might catch the coins tossed your way by compassionate pilgrims.

And they do come. “Alms for the poor!” you cry out, but few respond. You’re not only blind; you’re invisible too. Nobody sees you; nobody wants to see you. But who could blame them? They believe that your blindness is a punishment from God. But for what? You didn’t do anything wrong. But that doesn’t change anything, so you’re just a social outcast, invisible.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Commentary, NT Vol. 1*, pg. 148.

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How often in our day have we walked past a stranger as if they were invisible? Strangers who are disabled or “differently enabled” than us? Strangers missing a leg? Strangers in wheelchairs? Strangers with white canes or guide dogs. Strangers who are poor or misfit. Strangers and misfits who must’ve done something to deserve their lot in life.

But aren’t we all strangers and misfits?

And there you are, a blind person sitting on the side of the road on the outskirts of Jericho, listening to the chatter of passersby. You notice the differences in their accents, and you can tell that many of them have come from afar and they’re just passing through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem.

They all have money—not a lot. Mind you, everybody’s poor these days. But they’ll need money for Jerusalem. No doubt the inflated population will inflate the price of food and lodging, to say nothing of the cost of turtledoves for a poor soul’s sacrifice.

But Passover is also a time of heightened awareness of God’s mercy, so some throw a coin onto your cloak. They know that the poor and disadvantaged have a special place in the heart of God.

When they do throw a coin on your cloak, you feel for it to scoop it up and hide it into your money pouch so as not to give thieves any ideas.

Just then, you hear a rising commotion just down the road. What could it be? You pause in your pleas for alms to listen more intently. They draw closer. You make out the name of Jesus.

Could it be? Jesus?

You’ve heard about him, how he confounds the scribes and Pharisees with his wisdom. How he feeds the multitudes with just a few loaves and fish. But best of all, you’ve heard how he gives sight to the blind! This could be it! This could be the chance of a lifetime!

“Jesus!” you cry out. “Son of David! Have mercy on me!”

“Hey you! Silence!” a stranger’s voice growls.

But you cry out all the louder. “Son of David! Have mercy on me!”

“I warned you! Be quiet! No one has ever called him that before! Do you want to alert the authorities? If the Romans hear you calling him the Son of David, you’ll get us all arrested for treason!”

But you know that Jesus is your only hope. “Son of David! Have mercy on me!”

Have you ever felt that you were nothing but an annoyance to others? Guess what: you’re not an annoyance to Jesus. And at just that moment, he reaches you. But there are still too many people crowding around him, so he stops and says through the throng, “Call him.”

“Hey you! Beggarman! Jesus is calling for you.” The words are spoken gruffly, but they’re the most beautiful words you’ve ever heard in your life. For your entire adult life, you’ve been invisible, a nuisance. Nobody ever called for you. But he’s calling for you. And he’s not just anyone; Jesus the Son of David is calling for you! It doesn’t matter that you’re a beggar. It doesn’t matter that you’re less than perfect. It doesn’t matter that you have nothing to offer him. Jesus is calling for you!

“Cheer up!” This time the voice is more compassionate. “Jesus is calling you!” It’s a woman’s voice. She must be one of his regular followers. You could almost hear her smiling when she spoke.

“I’m coming!” And you throw your cloak aside, scattering the few coins that were on it. “I’m here!” you say as you jump to your feet. Something wells up inside you, and you think, “This must be what hope feels like.”

And then he speaks. “What do you want me to do for you?”

Your mouth opens, but no words come out.

“Do you, Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus, want to give up begging for a living?”

You gasp as it registers: *he knows my name!*

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“Do you want to live differently than this? Do you want to work for a living? To have no reason to sit the roadside day after day, calling out to passersby?”²

“Rabbi, please. I want to see. That’s all I ask. I just want to see again.”

And then: a gentle touch on your eyes as Jesus holds his fingers on them for a long moment.

“Go,” he says. “Your faith has opened your eyes.” And as Jesus drops his hands, you indeed open your eyes and the darkness melts away and the very first face you see is the face of Jesus, smiling at you. And in that moment your eyes cloud up again and it becomes difficult to see as the tears begin rolling down your cheeks. You tug your robe to your eyes in a vain attempt to dry your tears of joy, and there he is again, still smiling.

“Jesus! Son of David! Thank you! I can see! I can see! Thank you! From the bottom of my heart, Jesus, I thank you!” And you drop to your knees and worship this humble miracle worker from Nazareth.

And then, as he turns away, he scans the crowd as if looking for other blind beggars to heal. And then, tensing his jaw, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.

“Wait!” you cry out again. “Take me with you, Jesus!”

“If you would come after me, you must be willing to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says. “Are you willing to do that, Bartimaeus?”

“Lord, there’s not much to deny. I’m just a poor beggar. All I have are the clothes on my back. And that cloak over there. I don’t even have a cross to carry.”

That made him smile. “Come,” Jesus says. “Follow.” And you do.

Tradition tells us that Bartimaeus followed Jesus first to Bethany where he raised Lazarus from the tomb. He walked behind Jesus as he rode triumphantly on a colt into Jerusalem to the hosannas the crowd. He stood helplessly by as he was nailed to a Roman cross. After he was raised from the dead, Paul wrote that the risen Jesus was seen by 500 believers at one time. Do you think Bartimaeus was one of the 500?

Would you have been one of the 500 if you had followed him from Jericho?

Do you suppose Bartimaeus was among the 120 in the upper room on the Day of Pentecost? Do you suppose a tongue of fire danced on his head before he went out into the streets of Jerusalem to testify that once he was blind, but now he can see.

Because of Jesus.

² NT Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, pg. 143.