

October 28

Whitsuntide Twenty three

St Mark 10 46 - 52

Like every one of us here this morning, and all Christians everywhere and of all times, each of the four Gospel writers has their own perspective of Jesus. When we read carefully we can get glimpses of their personalities. Matthew, for example, works very hard at convincing his fellow Jews that Jesus is truly the long-awaited Messiah. He takes ancient prophecies completely out of context and uses them to drive home the point that Jesus is truly the King of kings and Lord of lords, beginning with that very long family history in the opening seventeen verses of the first chapter. In his book, everything in their long tradition and religion points to Jesus. And, more than any other of the writers, Matthew emphasizes the words and teachings of the Lord.

Mark is different. His book is the oldest and the shortest, and his emphasis is on the actions of Jesus. It is for this reason that we find many confrontations with the Pharisees and Temple authorities, and many miracle stories and examples of His divine power to heal those who were in pain or suffering. To be honest, he's making his point but it gets a bit repetitive after a while. When we come to this morning's short passage about the healing of Blind Bartimaeus it seems like it is another healing story, another miracle.

I believe we must look beyond the story and the miracle itself.

We pray for the needs of others and for ourselves - for recovery from illness, for comfort in times of pain, for those who are suffering from any affliction of the mind, body, soul, or spirit. Not only do we pray, but we firmly believe that God hears our prayers and answers them according to what He knows is best for us. We pray in thanksgiving when a person recovers from an illness, or when the sharp pain and lingering sorrow of the loss of a loved one begins to lessen; when someone succeeds in anything in life.

And yes miracles, very similar to the ones we read in the Gospel, do happen. We can not and will not deny that.

Yet, when it comes to good visual health in today's western world it almost seems in some ways that God has turned this task over to sub-contractors. And I can not emphasize enough, I am not being flippant about that phrase sub-contractors. Surgeons and physicians, biologists and chemists who create medicine, optometrists, and a host of others now do much of this work whether it is to restore sight or fit corrective lenses. To us it is routine and ordinary; to people in other countries, and even in some parts of this country, what they do today is truly a miracle.

Always remember that from Galileo making the first convex and concave lenses to laser surgery for cataracts and beyond, when we trace its history all the way back, it all comes from God. God gave ideas and imagination to scientists, surgeons, and others. The materials used in eye care all came from the Creator. So did the

inspiration, wisdom, and hard work. It is all God's doing, and we affirm it. Indeed, when we are in need of their care, we pray to God; when our vision has been improved, it is to God we give our thanks.

When we return to this morning's passage, modern science and medicine entice us to look at the Lord's healing of the blind man as merely an historic incident. It isn't that way now, we sigh. Yes, St Mark is emphasizing the divine nature and power of Jesus, but if we take this story at face value we are likely to just move on, keep reading, and not reflect. When that happens, we miss something extremely important. We need to explore these six short verses from a new perspective.

For us, there is far more than physical blindness or limited sight. All of us, at one time or another, and with perfectly reasonable eyesight have walked right past something or someone, without perceiving them. Perhaps our mind is elsewhere or there is something else going on at that moment. We simply didn't see them even though we were looking right at them. We didn't mean to snub them, and when we realize our blunder, we apologize.

However, we are also perfectly capable of averting our eyes, looking the other way, or just seemingly look through people: Street people, addicts, the mentally ill. Or it might be someone grossly over-weight or handicapped. Our refusal to see is especially true about those who are different from us. Our fear, whether it is the individual or of becoming one of them is our spiritual blindness that prevents us from doing something for them. It stops us from allowing them into our life. Fear is spiritual blindness, and no surgeon can fix that; only God's healing power.

But then, spiritual blindness is almost always the result of trying to establish our own little kingdom rather than making our first concern for others who are fellow members in God's kingdom.

Climb to the top of our beloved Mount Baldhead and look out to Lake Michigan. We see a beautiful shoreline and endless expanse of water. Yet we can be complacently blind to our part in its pollution, and our responsibility to protect what God has created and entrusted to us. What God creates was never intended to be humanity's litter box.

The opportunities for spiritual blindness are endless. Perhaps we are intentionally blind to the past simply because it is old, familiar and traditional; blind to the possibilities of the future simply because it is the unknown. We could so easily have done that here as we observed our 150th anniversary - living in the spiritual blindness of wanting to live in the past, rather than seeing Jesus always leading and calling us forward. We chose not to yield to this. We honoured our past and our traditions, yet at the same time we are rapidly moving forward to a new and different Episcopal presence here as exemplified by the mission and vision and the governance task forces.

Conversely, spiritual blindness can be so focused on anything and everything that is new, we don't think and discern its value. Do you remember as a child standing in front of the big department store showcase windows before Christmas. We were frozen in place looking at the shiny objects, the lights, the motion. It was all so new, so wonderful, beautiful toys. But we were too young to know if they were just cheap shiny plastic or something worthwhile. We were too young to know the difference, and not experienced enough to discern.

There are opportunities to become blinded by power sometimes choosing to grasp it. Sometimes, choosing to go along with others simply because they have power and we want power, too. To be so blinded by power that we can no longer see others who end up getting badly hurt. We are blinded by envy when we want to be the insiders, not those outside. Instantly we might think of the great dictators of the last century, but that is yet another form of blindness, for they rely on blindness. We can blind ourselves to revolutionaries with grand ideas and a quick tongue who want to impose their ideas. It is like teenagers who look enviously at the cool kids table in the school lunch room, and are willing to sell our soul to be like them as they smugly smirk at the others.

It is the worst form of blindness because we are careless of others, and leave them hurt and reeling in pain. It goes against everything Jesus teaches. It often happens when belief in service is replaced by protecting power at all costs, no matter who is hurt.

Spiritual blindness us behind all of the angry words spoken and yelled, or written on all platforms of social media. It comes from all sides. And words do have impact, as we have seen this week - pipe bombs, a bigot entering an African American Church and killing two people; or yesterday's murder of at least eight and wounding of others in Pittsburgh. Whether in the home, a small meeting, or a massive events - words matter, and only the spiritual blind so allow their passion to get the best of them that they forget how they hurt others.

As I said a few moments ago, no surgeon or clinician has a cure for this sort of blindness. The healing of this sort of blindness - spiritual healing - is only something that can and will come from God, from Jesus Christ, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life.

We are not without hope. Our hope is in the name of the Lord, and no one else, for all good things come from and through him. We are people of hope. We can be better than we are now in our question to employ Christ's love, compassion, and care in our life.

That takes us directly back to Bartimaeous, sitting on the side of the road, calling out for Jesus to come and heal him. Others tried to squelch him, probably out of their own agenda to take control and keep him in his place. Bartimaeous didn't give up. He kept calling for Jesus. And Jesus healed him.

It takes us to other words of Jesus - ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. Even when we are spiritually blind and stumbling around like someone in a pitch black unfamiliar room, we call for Jesus with absolute confidence that we will have spiritual blindness miraculously replaced with clearer insight into God's will.

We must take every advantage and every opportunity to be restored to spiritual side. Our prayer must be for clear, divinely holy spiritual sight that leads us to clearly see things as they are, not as we want them to be, repentance, and surrendering our will to God's will for us.