

30TH SUNDAY • B
OCTOBER 24-25, 2009 – CHRIST THE KING

It may be easy to see this morning's gospel as, well, just another miracle story. We hear or read a lot of them in the Gospels, and we sometimes think, "Okay, cool enough, Jesus cured still somebody else. Yeah, Lord – go Jesus!"

Let's not do that today. Let's look at this story more closely. For starters, let's begin in Jericho with the blind man, Bartimaeus, using a little dramatic imagination.

Scene One: a few years before the encounter with Jesus in Jericho.
The players: Bartimaeus, a poor person, a hungry person, and a forgotten person.

Bartimaeus is walking along, surveying the all the sights to be seen. He delights in the sky, the flowers, the trees, all the beauty that surrounds him. In Jesus' day, Jericho was like Palm Springs; a desert oasis that pampered the rich. Once you got there, you wanted to stay.

As Bartimaeus walks around enjoying the beauty of the city, he encounters the first figure. A poor person lifts his hands in supplication; he wants a donation, a handout, anything. The poor person is desperate. Bartimaeus is revolted by the poor person, pushes him away, covers his eyes and continues down the road.

Bartimaeus encounters the next figure. The hungry holds her stomach, it is aching and empty. The hungry lifts a hand toward Bartimaeus, seeking some relief or help. Bartimaeus is sickened by the sight and once again pushes her away and covers his eyes.

A little further down the road, Bartimaeus bumps into the forgotten. The forgotten is unseen and overlooked by society, the invisible. He reaches out, looking for some sign of recognition. Again Bartimaeus is revolted, shoves the forgotten aside and covers his eyes.

Bartimaeus runs away frantically. He doesn't want to see all of this distress and agony and ugliness. He pauses and prays that God take all these sights away. He doesn't want to see this pain and misery. Slowly Bartimaeus' face becomes relieved and somewhat peaceful. His prayer has been answered. Bartimaeus is blind.

Now Bartimaeus begins to experience the same rejection he handed out. He experiences poverty, hunger and soon he is one of the unseen of society.

Scene Two: Today's Gospel

The Players: Bartimaeus, Jesus and the crowd

Jesus is leaving Jericho with a large crowd . Sitting by the roadside is Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus speaks: "What's all the commotion, What's all the excitement about?" Someone in the crowd answers, "Jesus of Nazareth is leaving town." Bartimaeus cries out, Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me." The crowd tries to hush Bartimaeus, "Hey, old man, knock it off! What do you want to do, ruin his visit here?" But Bartimaeus only shouts more insistently, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me."

Jesus stops and calls Bartimaeus to him. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The scene freezes. Bartimaeus contemplates, "What do I want? What on earth do I want? (pause) I think I want to see."

Scene three: the freeze frame

The Players: Bartimaeus and the symbolic figures

The symbolic figures question Bartimaeus, " So you think you want to see, do you? Once before you could see and much of what you saw disgusted you. You prayed then that you wouldn't have to see all those things in this world that disturbed and unsettled you. Your prayer was answered. You now know our darkness and pain. Do you really want to see Bartimaeus?"

Bartimaeus replies, “ I don’t know. I’m confused. I think I want to see. I really do!

The poor ask: “And with your sight, how much of me will you take in? Will you stand with me in my helplessness? Can you make room in your life for the stranger who is poor in so many ways?”

The hungry ask: “Once before you turned away from me, Bartimaeus. Will you listen to the pleas of the starving all around you? Do you have the courage to experience and share my hunger and thirst for acceptance, for companionship, for healing, for love?”

The forgotten ask: “Do you want to see all of us who struggle desperately for love and life? Do you want to see all those for whom you have a word of judgment but no word of grace? Do you want to see all those from whom you have no thought, no feeling, no recognition at all?”

Bartimaeus responds: “Yes, I want to see all of this, all of you. With all my heart I want to see.”

Scene four: back with Jesus

The players: Jesus and Bartimaeus

Jesus asks, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Bartimaeus answers, “I want to see.”

Jesus responds, “Your faith has healed you.”

And Bartimaeus received his sight and followed Jesus.

What if this is a metaphor for life? And if it is, could Jericho represent for us, at least today, the good life we have imagined and, for the most part, expect? And if it is, what do we find when we leave Jericho? At the very least, the story tells us we may well find a Bartimaeus. We may find a shouting, needy, broken life that needs sight, hope, encouragement, a future. In a word, we may find a reality that is more real than what we knew in Jericho. Let me explain.

When life is brimming with joy, when all seems to be going our way, and especially when we can grasp and hold all the good things we think we deserve, the great temptation is to think that's what life is all about. The greatest temptation when living in Jericho is to think we have a right to indulge ourselves with whatever it is that makes us happy. If I can afford it, I should have it. The temptations of Jericho are many: selfishness, pride, lust, and greed, would be but a few.

It's only when we leave Jericho, when the party is over and we walk away from all that glitters, that we discover what it is God calls us to do, to be, and to become. That Jesus healed Bartimaeus of his blindness when he left Jericho is not incidental to the story. Rather, it is telling us that on the other side of indulgent self-interest is another – maybe countless others – who are calling from us our best selves to bring light from darkness.

So what do we do? What does it mean for us to leave Jericho? First, **leaving Jericho suggests that God calls us to be God's gift to others.** Day after day, month after month, year after year, Bartimaeus sat by that roadside as tens of thousands passed by. Most heard the blind man begging; only a few dropped pocket change into his weathered hands; **only one stopped to give him sight.** As followers of Jesus Christ we are invited to see all human beings, and to recognize each as children of God. Such is the gift God calls us to give when we leave Jericho.

Leaving Jericho sends us in the direction of Jerusalem. For Jesus, that meant betrayal, suffering, rejection, and a cross. For us, at the very least, it means we move in the direction of self-giving and sacrifice. Leaving Jericho finds our feet climbing the steep path to Jerusalem. And there, we learn that God is the One who loves us in our blindness, finds us in sin, and saves us from living a life of self-centeredness. It's not until we leave Jericho that we have the ability to go to Jerusalem. And only in Jerusalem, before a splintered cross and beneath an angry sky, do we see that the heart of God is a heart of love.