

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B' (Proper 30)
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Stories of blindness in Scripture exist on two levels. On one level they are, of course, about physical loss of human sight. But on another level, a level which concerns all of us, they are about the emotional and spiritual impairment of vision which so often characterizes human affairs. We talk of “not being able to see beyond the tip of our nose” or of having a “blind spot.” So in our gospel this morning, we are meant to identify with the blind beggar Bartimeus, and to see in him our own inability to see, an inability that isolates and disables each one of us.

When Bartimeus hears that Jesus is passing by, he calls out. But think about it: he calls out for healing to the God he cannot see, beseeching Jesus who stands before him for healing. Yet the more he cries out, the more he is told by those around Jesus to be quiet. In this way, Mark addresses the lack of perception even people of faith can demonstrate, and the resulting indifference and hostility that can ensue from such myopia to the pitiful condition of those most in need of God's healing mercy.

So Mark takes this seemingly simple account of a healing and spins it—as it were—so that in it we see how it's often the people of faith who lack faith, just as it's often those whom we, or the world, or the Church, would regard as “blind” who contain within them the very stuff of faith. Bartimeus has faith that Jesus can heal him because he sees with his heart what others cannot see even with their eyes. In other words, this account of the healing of Bartimeus is a theological meditation on how it's amidst the blindness and scantiness of this world that the Kingdom of God emerges.

Think about the story again. Jesus stands still before Bartimeus, and the crowd calls out to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So Bartimeus casts off his cloak, which is quite probably the only thing he has in the world. He leaves behind his most precious possession, which is a reminder to us of the letting-go and leaving behind of our most prized possessions—name them what you will — that Jesus' call demands of us. And notice: Bartimeus stands up. He gets up on his own two feet, no longer the passive beggar, but one who is willing to meet God in full stature in response to God's call, because in this encounter his spirit has already begun to be awakened by God's standing before him. So in the end, the granting of physical sight is really a bonus for Bartimeus, who all along has seen with the eyes of faith, and the gift of renewed physical sight is the gift and fulfilment of God's bountiful goodness.

What I'm trying to say is this: that God is passing by and hearing the prayers of each and every life rendered powerlessness and unmanageable by all of the things in life that blind us and bind us. And God stands still before us, so that we may surrender

our will and our life to his loving mercy. That is to say, God comes to us from a world from beyond and even within our woundedness—whatever the name of the woundedness may be—to comfort us in this world that can be uncomfortable; a world where everyone is trying to grope their way through life amidst people, places, things and events they cannot really perceive; a world in which many feel the isolation and aloneness of it all so much of the time.

When God stands before you and me we are in the presence of a new way of seeing and being. This is this mystery and miracle of redemptive love, the divine mystery, the hidden eternal, which emerges and is revealed in people, places, things, and events in a world where God is easily overlooked. This is because there is always so much dust of fame, fortune, fear, hurt, pride and wilfulness in our eyes so as to blind us to the one who is closer to us than we are to ourselves. There is so much that blinds us to the One who has revealed his name as love. There is so much that blinds us to the One who has planted his spirit in our hearts that we may always freely call upon him with expectation of being heard. Christ frees us to see, by showing us how to perceive and recognize the invisible God who is always just beyond our sight.

What begins for us when God stands still before us and calls us is repentance, which results whenever and wherever along life's way we are healed of some blindness of heart, some unhappiness, whenever and wherever we get the dust of this life out of our eyes long enough to see the exact nature of reality. And the reality is, we live in God's kingdom now with a God who daily sets our feet on a path of active discipleship, by which we are called to let go of some of the things we cling to most: people, places, things, events, hurts, resentments, fears or prejudices. For only when we do this can we step forward, stand up on our own two feet, and face duties and obligations in this world where our woundedness and disability are no longer limitations, but signs of God's incarnation in our lives. God stands in front of us today to awaken our eyes and hearts to the perspective of a deeper dimension of being, the perspective of new life in the Kingdom of God.

Today's Gospel would have been lost if Bartimeus had continued to sit along the Jericho road expecting nothing! But he had hope, and thus we are reminded that we, too, must hope in the One who continues to come into this world, a world where sorrow and joy are unlikely companions, a world where there is always more mystery than certainty, a world in which there is always much to be discovered and much work to do in order to make it the kingdom of God. We must have hope that in his standing before us, in his calling to us, he will lighten our burdens and open our eyes to the vision that is just beyond the tips of our noses. He stands before us now...Take heart; get up, he is calling you.