

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Very few of us can fully identify with those who are physically blind. And yet most of us have times when we can say that we did not see the reality around us. When something tragic happens in our lives we might find ourselves saying that we were blind to the dangers that overcame us. Or when we fail to appreciate someone, we might say that we were blind to their good qualities. Blindness and seeing are often used to describe something that has little to do with the eyes.

In Mark's gospel we discover that Jesus heals two blind men. He heals one just before he begins his journey towards Jerusalem. He heals the other, the one that we meet today, at the end of that journey, just before he makes his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. That Mark places these two healing stories as bookends to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem makes us think that they could be more than just healing stories. We look for the symbolism that they may contain. The healing at the beginning of the journey takes some time and is only partially successful at first. It can speak to us of the struggle that Jesus' companions had as they walked with him to see what he was revealing to them about himself and about his mission as their Messiah. They were blind to what he was telling them about his approaching suffering and death. They could not see that his kingdom was very different to the kingdoms that they knew.

The healing of Bartimaeus the blind beggar is quite a different experience. At the beginning of the story, he is sitting at the side of the road. Those who follow Jesus are often described as being on the road. When Bartimaeus was told that it was Jesus who was coming he began to shout, "Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me." This is the only time in Mark's gospel that Jesus allows himself to be called Son of David. His passion is so close that the true nature of his Messiahship will soon be made clear. Now it is the crowd who tries to keep this man quiet, but it was no use. His faith drove him to shout even louder, "Son of David, have pity on me."

Jesus heard his prayer and asked the crowd who had been holding him back to call Bartimaeus to him. We are told that he threw off his cloak, jumped up and went to Jesus. It was the enthusiastic response of someone filled with faith ready to accept the call to follow Jesus. Throwing off his cloak, the only possession he had, is perhaps a sign that he was ready to leave everything in order to follow Jesus.

Jesus then asked exactly the same question of Bartimaeus as he had of James and John. "What do you want me to do for you?" But what a different answer he gets. James and John wanted places of honour in his kingdom. They showed how blind they were.

Bartimaeus, the beggar, asks Jesus to let him see again. He wants to be able to see, not just with his natural eyes, but with the eyes of faith. When Jesus healed the first blind man he went through a complicated ritual. Here he doesn't even speak a word of healing. He just tells Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has saved you." And Mark tells us that immediately his sight was restored. At the beginning of the story, he was a blind beggar sitting at the side of the road. Now he can see, and he is on the road, following Jesus into Jerusalem as one of his disciples. He is in fact a model for all of us who have been given the faith to see and follow Jesus.

As we look back at that story, perhaps we can see Bartimaeus as a model for us in a number of different ways. In a sense we are all blind beggars, dependent upon those around us. The crowd played their part in alerting the blind man to the presence of Jesus. But then they tried to silence him and hold him back until Jesus asked them to bring him to them. We can play our part in helping others to see when Jesus is near; but we can also stand in the way of people coming to him.

Bartimaeus was aware of his own needs and aware of the stirrings that were in his heart. When we honestly face the needs that we have, we open our hearts to God. We allow the God who knows our needs to meet us where we are. It is a great grace to be able to hear Jesus say to

us as he did to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" The question is a very open one isn't it? Jesus leaves it up to us to decide if we ask him to give us what we want or what we need.

When Bartimaeus was healed of his blindness and began to follow Jesus along the road the story isn't ended is it? It is really just the beginning of another story. We don't know how well Bartimaeus lived his faith. We don't hear of him again in the gospel. Our journey of faith continues too. We are continually learning how to be faithful followers of Jesus. We are continually asking the Spirit of God to guide us along the Way of Jesus.

I hardly imagine what it is like to be physically blind. But I know that I am often blind in so many other ways. I can be blind to where God is in my life each day. I fail to see Jesus in the people who care for me. I am blind to the reflections of God's beauty in the world that God has made.

Today like Bartimaeus I ask God that I may see again. I ask Jesus to help me to see more clearly the road on which he leads me. I ask him to help me to see the love that he has for me, so that filled with that love I may help others to see him.