

Saint Luke's – The Rev. Maurice L. Goldsmith

5:00 p.m. Service

Sunday, October 25, 2009

Proper 25, Year B RCL

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked the blind beggar.

Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, where the cross and crown await – the events we remember as Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter.

Now they are in Jericho, that ancient oasis town less than a day's hard walk through the wilderness to Jerusalem – the last stop before the big climax, and the disciples are anxious to hit the road, still thinking about earthly power and glory – ready to share what they still incorrectly believe will be Jesus' political, military victory.

And so this interruption and delay are most unwelcome.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” the beggar shouts again, even louder.

Now Jesus stops and invites him to come forward.

“Oh, boy,” the disciples must have mumbled to each other, “here he goes again. No telling how long this will take! And we were almost out of town.”

The blind man flings off his cloak, his only possession and protection, and lurches in the direction of the one he has called “Son of David”- that is “Messiah.”

Perhaps he stumbles a time or two as he gropes his way toward the voice of Jesus, perhaps not, but in any event, anyone can tell at a glance that he is sightless.

And so Jesus' question seems foolish. “What do you want me to do for you?”

I have a vision of several of the disciples slapping their foreheads and rolling their eyes. Yet Jesus knows it is never that simple, knows how important it is to ask.

The blind man does not hesitate, however. “My teacher – rabbi - let me see again.”

“Done,” says Jesus. “Go; your faith, your trust, has made you well.”

And we are told that immediately he regained his sight, and, probably to more headshaking and grumbling on the part of the disciples, this stinking, sinful beggar becomes one of them, as he sets out with them on the road to Jerusalem.

Another simple little story of Jesus healing just one more in a long line of lame, blind, possessed unfortunates?

What, if anything, makes this account, found only in Mark, special?

And what, if anything, does it have to say to us?

First the name – “Bartimaeus.”

Rarely do we know the names of those Jesus heals, so there must be a reason that Mark names him, and there is.

Bartimaeus. Bar is in Hebrew what Mac is to a Scot.

The beggar’s name is Son of Timaeus.

Timaeus is not a Hebrew name. It is Greek and there is no one with that name in the entire Bible. So why does the Gospel writer use it here?

Timaeus was a well-known Greek philosopher in the 4th century before Christ, a disciple and colleague of Plato. He is important in the history of ancient philosophy, but his name appears here as a hint and allegory, because he was best known for his theory of knowledge. How do we humans come to know anything, he asked? And then, even more to our point, how do we gain wisdom?

Timaeus believed and taught that the foundation of all knowledge is sight, that seeing is primary. The most important way we learn, he reasoned, is through our vision. Vision, he went on to say, is the ability to also interpret the information that our eyes take in. And that, in turn, can lead us to wisdom.

Are you with me? Because this gets really interesting when we realize the irony of a blind man being called that philosopher’s son. And more than just interesting, it is the key to the deepest meaning of this story. (Sounds like the daVinci Code.)

To go a little deeper, remember that the Jewish mainstream theology of that time said that misfortunes and disease and disabilities were the results of, and punishment for, sin.

As we read some of that theology in the Book of Job tonight, recall that his friends and even his wife have been urging him to confess his sins, the sins that have brought all these calamities upon him, they believe.

But Job has adamantly refused to give in – has been constant in his denial that his misfortunes are the results of his sins. All he has wanted was to know that God not only existed, but also took notice of him, that his suffering and his life are not random.

And that is what Job is responding to in the final section we just heard. God has just spoken to Job, has revealed himself, and Job now responds.

“I had heard of you by the hearing of my ear, but now my eye SEES you. Thank you, Lord. That is really all I wanted; that is enough.” But as we heard, God in his grace gives Job so much more. Job is rewarded for his steadfast faith, without mention of whether or not he had sinned.

Most people that day in Jericho, when they looked at Bartimaeus, the first thing they saw was a sinner and, by definition, an outcast.

Yet without preamble or confession, Bartimaeus begs Jesus, “Rabbi, let me see again,” and he regained his sight.

It is understood that in the process his sins are forgiven.

So what we have here is not only a physical restoration of sight, but also even more dramatically, a restoration of relationship to God and community. Like God with Job, Jesus gives him what he has asked, and so much more. He gives him new life.

Forgiveness of sin was thought to be only possible through the priests of the Temple as official representatives of God, and only after the repentant sinner had offered the prescribed sacrifices.

That is, unless the one through whom the healing is accomplished is the Messiah. Restoring of sight was a special mark and authentication of Messiahship.

And now we are getting to the heart of the matter.

In Mark’s Gospel, this is the last act of Jesus’ healing ministry. It is not only a sign of Jesus’ identity as Messiah, but also a hint, a clue to his true identity as well.

Mark is saying in somewhat veiled terms,

“Look at this, folks. Jesus, even focused as he is on the events that are about to unfold in Jerusalem, still takes time to minister to this blind beggar.

Jesus can heal because he is the Messiah, and can forgive sins without the priests and the Temple with its sacrifices.

Jesus can be known even by those who do not see him.

I know what the Greeks teach about the priority of vision for knowledge, but they are only partially right. Those who will never see Jesus in the flesh receive knowledge of him and his healing salvation, even if they are as physically blind as Bartimaeus. Through faith, through trust in God's love and mercy. Through a life based on that faith. You who hear this Gospel will receive true wisdom when, like Bartimaeus, your eyes are opened and you see Jesus and follow him on the way. And isn't it wonderful that the only one in the crowd who hails Jesus as Messiah is a blind man."

That is Mark's brave witness and hope-filled message.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrew's says much the same thing to the early Christians, good Jews all, who are having second thoughts about Jesus as the Messiah.

(Unlike the temple priests, Jesus, the author says,) "is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

We have a high priest exalted above the heavens who once and for all has made the atoning sacrifice when he offered himself on the cross for our sins."

The writer is proclaiming Jesus our savior, the Messiah who saves us from the eternal consequences of our sins – that is, he heals us by his grace, he restores our true sight, and gives us the deeper wisdom and power that comes to those who trust in him.

Jesus supersedes the Temple of the Jews and the wisdom of the Greeks. Truly, he is the Messiah, and might just be something more.

The early Christians needed this hope and reassurance as the world weakened and threatened their faith.

And so do we.

In a moment we will together affirm that we believe all of this, as we say the Nicene Creed. Then we will pray the Prayers of the People, followed by our Confession of sins - yours and mine.

But before I pronounce Absolution for our sins, as I will do as Christ's priest and representative, I am going to pause for a minute or two, and I will invite you at that time to close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting by Bartimaeus that day in Jericho;

that you hear the crowd and breath the dust and feel, to the depths of your being, that you are in desperate need of healing;

that you too are a beggar, in every sense of that word;

that you too have a sin or sins that harm your relationship with God and with your neighbors;

that you too are being invited to come to Jesus and kneel at his feet;

that you too are being asked to name your infirmities of body, mind or spirit, invited to request your heart's desire;

that you too are being asked by Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you?"

(I will remind you of all of this, one part at the time, and you can respond silently or aloud.)

And as we do that together, know that Jesus is with us tonight, here in the ordered stillness of St. Luke's no less than he was with Bartimaeus in Jericho.

Know that Jesus still has time for you.

Know that he still has the power to heal and forgive you.

Know that he still loves you enough to die for you.

Know that he still invites you to follow him to a transformed life in the Kingdom of his Father.

Know that Jesus will open your eyes, give you new life, and set you free.