

“A Sight to Behold”

Scholars have puzzled for centuries over who the author of the Gospel of Mark was and where he or she lived. The gospel was initially circulated without a title or author. It was not until years later that this gospel was attributed to someone named Mark. Some started speculating that he was John Mark who is encountered in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

One of the practices that the scholars have used to try to determine who the author was and where he lived is actually to read Mark for clues. One of those clues is that author does not seem to know the geography of Palestine very well. He uses place names for towns by the sea that are actually miles inland. He has Jesus walking in the wrong direction to get somewhere, and similar other geographical mistakes.

Another one of those clues shows up in today’s reading, that is his poor knowledge of Aramaic. The writer introduces us to a blind beggar sitting by the side of the road. This man is named Bartemeus. The writer then tells us that Bartemeus is the son of Temeus. If Mark knew Aramaic, the common language of Palestine and the language that Jesus probably spoke, he would have known that Bartemeus means Son of Temeus. The only other reason to explain what Bartemeus means is if his audience does not know. In either case it does not matter to the story.

What then are we to make of this short interlude as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem? I think that Mark wants us to see something more than just another miracle story. This is why he focuses on the blind beggar and gives him a name (recipients of miracles are not named in Mark). Naming him is a clue for us to focus on him. While he is just a beggar and no one of importance, he is audacious. When he hears the crowd coming down the road he could just ask for alms and hope to receive a few pennies. Instead he cries shouts, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Despite those in the throng trying to shut him out, he shouts out ever more forcefully, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” Bartemeus is determined to get healing.

However, the crowd wants Jesus all to themselves. A beggar is just an everyday annoyance. They don’t want him to get in the way of their experience. This is reminiscent of other times when the disciples, in particular, try to keep people away from Jesus. I am thinking of them pushing children and their parents away, and the Syrophoenician woman whom they want to send away because she is such a pest. When they try to push someone away, it is an opportunity for Jesus to act. It tells me that in my role as a Christian and a priest my job is not to keep people from Jesus but to facilitate their getting to Jesus as best we can. That might seem obvious, but we only have to look at how over the centuries the Church has created rules and regulations to determine who is fit to approach the Altar and eat of the body and blood of Jesus. The recent controversy in the Roman Catholic Church over allowing Joe Biden to receive Communion is the most recent instances.

Jesus commands Bartemeus be brought to him. Despite his obvious blindness Jesus does not presume to know what Bartemeus wants. Instead he asks him, “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartemeus names it and immediately (Mark’s favorite word) Bartemeus is able to see again. The text does not say that Jesus laid hands on him, made mud with his spit as he did

earlier in the gospel to heal a blind man, or do anything else. Indeed, Jesus does not take any credit for the healing at all. He says to him “your faith has made you well.” It is not the faith of the healer or his special power as the Son of David, but the faith of Bartemeus’ that has healed him.

In his final words to Bartemeus he tells him to “Go,” but instead Bartemeus follows. This reminds us of the wealthy man whom Jesus encountered earlier. You will remember that the man asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life. He told Jesus that he had kept all of God’s laws. Jesus loved this man. He told him to ““You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” The rich man was offered the opportunity to follow Jesus and it seems he could not take it.

Both men were bold in approaching Jesus. For the rich man it was made easy, for the beggar it was not. The rich man stated his desire without being asked, the beggar humbly waited to be asked. Both were given what they asked for. The beggar accepted the gift and followed Jesus. The wealthy man could not accept the gift, because, he seemed to have a greater love for the status quo. Similar stories with greatly different outcomes.

When we ask we have to be ready to receive. We also have to be aware that what we receive may have unforeseen responsibilities or requirements. We ask for our dream job without realizing the many hours involved. We ask for a baby not realizing the toll sleep-deprivation takes. We ask for healing not realizing the responsibility we have to stay well.

The Kingdom of God is no different. It requires much more of us than an occasional Sunday morning in church and a few bucks in the offering plate. It requires that we follow Jesus wherever he may lead even if it is Calvary and the cross. That may not seem like Good News, but to learn to live that selflessly is greater than the gift of sight or giving up our possessions. To follow Jesus this selflessly is to receive the gift of real sight not blurred by the cares of this world. To love Jesus this deeply is to give away our self to the one who lived selflessly, and teaches us to do the same. Follow him, for that is the key to eternal life. That is what the blind beggar teaches us, and what the rich man couldn’t.