

Blindness

“The blind man replied to him, ‘Master, I want to see.’” Mark 10:51

Just about every culture has a proverb about “sighted” people who do not “see.” The Dutch version, for example, is: “*Those have the greatest blindness who think they have none.*” The Italian version: “*One may have good eyes and see nothing.*” And the English version: “*There are none so blind as those who will not see.*”

We live in a world of paradox. Some people blessed with *physical* eyesight lack the ability to perceive *spiritual* reality. Others, though physically blind, live life with spiritual insight far beyond their sighted counterparts.

Today’s gospel reading from **Mark** about the blind man in Jericho is a classic example. There are many such healing stories in the gospels, but this is one of the few that mentions the person’s name – *Bartimaeus*. It’s also one of several where a person of faith *believes* Jesus can heal him or her, and healing does, in fact, occur.

But the author of **Mark** takes this story and uses literary skill to reveal much more. He situates the story at the end of a long section where Jesus is traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem and his fate on the cross. This section begins in Galilee with the healing of another blind man who is unnamed. Jesus rubs saliva on that man’s eyes, but healing occurs *gradually*; we’re told that people to him, at first, look like trees. And when his sight is completely restored, he goes on his own way. What’s the author revealing with this detail? The healed man’s “fuzzy vision” foreshadows the apostles’ misunderstanding of the information Jesus will reveal about himself on the way to Jerusalem.

Following that healing in Galilee, Jesus makes three predictions of what awaits him in Jerusalem. Peter privately acknowledges Jesus as Messiah, but it becomes evident that neither Peter nor the other apostles understand what that really means. Recall, after all, that Peter denies Jesus three times on Good Friday and that he and most of the others flee Jerusalem in panic after the Crucifixion. Moreover, in last Sunday's gospel, you will recall, James and John are depicted as vying for places of honor in the kingdom Jesus proclaims. At the point of today's gospel reading, Jesus and the Twelve are leaving Jericho, a large crowd is following them and they encounter Bartimaeus, a blind beggar -- an outcast in Judean society.

Mark structures the encounter as a model of faith and discipleship. Bartimaeus calls out "*Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.*" This is the first time someone, other than a demon, publicly refers to Jesus by the messianic title, "*son of David.*" Bartimaeus, who *perceives* Jesus' true identity, makes a spectacle of himself to attract the Master's attention. Although the crowd tries to silence the beggar, Jesus asks that he be called forward.

Bartimaeus throws aside his cloak -- which, no doubt, would have been spread on the ground for people to throw coins onto -- and goes to Jesus. Symbolically, the beggar leaves behind his old way of life. In other words, he has a "conversion" experience. When Jesus asks what he wants from him, Bartimaeus answers without hesitation: "*Master, I want to see.*" This time, healing is *immediate*, unlike the gradual healing of the blind man in Galilee. And unlike that man who goes his own way, the now sighted Bartimaeus *follows* Jesus "*on the way,*" that is, he becomes a disciple.

In the next section of **Mark's** gospel Jesus enters Jerusalem in *triumph*; it's Palm Sunday, five days before Good Friday. Bartimaeus, by following Jesus to Jerusalem, demonstrates that his newly gained physical eyesight mirrors his *spiritual* insight – a marked contrast to the Twelve, who are often portrayed in Scripture as *spiritually blind* in their understanding of Jesus' true identity.

A 92-year-old man, who was fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock with hair fashionably combed and face perfectly shaven, even though legally blind, moved to a nursing home. His wife of 70 years passed away recently, making the move necessary. After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, he smiled sweetly when told his room was ready.

As he maneuvered his walker to the elevator, the nurse provided a visual description of his tiny room. "I love it," he stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy. "But Mr. Jones, you haven't seen the room; just wait." "That doesn't have anything to do with it," he replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged ... it's how I arrange my mind. I already decided to love it. It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice; I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work or I can get out of bed and be thankful for the parts that do work.

"Each day," he continued, "is a gift, and as long as my eyes open, I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away...just for this time in my life. Old age, you see, is like a bank account. You withdraw from what you've put in."

The physically blind can, indeed, live life with insight far beyond their sighted counterparts. I bet you, like me, know people gifted with such insight, particularly people with disabilities or those carrying especially heavy crosses. Too many of us blessed with eye sight, however, don't see things as they are; we see things as *we* are and the result is often unsatisfying. Some of us, in fact, don't want to see what's right before our very eyes—like relationship problems; destructively addictive behaviors; friends with questionable values; instances of injustice. It takes courage to ask for sight, because it usually requires change-- perhaps radical change that we're unprepared or unwilling to make.

Sages and gurus throughout history have taught that life is a spiritual journey. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, French philosopher and Jesuit priest, once said “*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.*”

Our faith teaches that the Spirit, first received at baptism, is alive and well within and among us, but we can choose to ignore it. When we acknowledge and submit to it, however, we see the same things as before, but perceive them differently. Looking at life with spiritual insight, for example, we're able to make sense of our complex world and our purpose in it. We're able to understand what's really important and what's not.

Seeing in this way for instance, we realize that what's most important in life aren't careers, prestige, power, success, material accumulation -- what's most important are *relationships*. When we see with spiritual insight, we perceive God's love in countless ways – in the kindness of strangers; the support of family and friends; the wonders of creation. When we see with spiritual insight, we recognize people we may

have overlooked – like the poor, the hungry, the disadvantaged; nameless, faceless non-persons whose voices aren't heard, whose rights aren't respected and whose presence isn't wanted.

Jesus was born to show us the way to spiritual wellbeing; how to live life joyfully and abundantly. To do that we have to train ourselves to see reality from God's perspective. Like Bartimaeus, we have to be willing to throw aside old ways of thinking and old ways of interpreting the world around us. Like Bartimaeus, we have to be willing to view reality through *spiritual* eyes...so as not to fall into the trap expressed in another common cross cultural proverb...about *the blind leading the blind*.

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Jeremiah 31:7-9; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52.

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time. October 25, 2009. (Cycle B)