

## Blindly Following Jesus

Job 42.1-6, 10-17 Ps 34.1-8, 19-22  
52

Hb 7.23-28

\*Mk 10.46-

Year B, After Pentecost

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Vista La Mesa CC, La Mesa CA, Rebecca Littlejohn's vacation

John Kennedy is the first president that I remember. For his 1961 inauguration we were escorted across the courtyard from the kindergarten room—its own building—to the multi-purpose room with the big kids, to watch the ceremony. It was impressive, all the classes from 5<sup>th</sup> grade down to kindergarten, about 150 kids, lined up by age so that all could see on the school's one television secured on an AV cart (a 19"?). It was so modern!

What does a 5-year-old absorb of civic speeches? I don't remember a thing of the inauguration itself, except thinking that it must be very important to interrupt our school day like this.

Later I learned what he said that day. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." It's the attitude that you want to find in citizens of a nation, in your neighbors, in members of a congregation, in followers of Jesus. Jesus might have hoped to find that attitude; instead he encounters crowds of needy people, begging things from him.

Bartimaeus's story is the close of a significant section of the gospel, the transition from ministry in Galilee toward confrontation in Jerusalem, from discovering the person Jesus toward discipleship and discernment.

This section is centered with the question 'who do you say that I am?' and filled with Jesus' teachings about death and discipleship. Take note, that question is addressed in the plural not the singular: "Who do all of you say that I am?" "Who do you (together) say that I am?" We have to answer it for ourselves, but we are never alone when we do.

Mk brackets this section with two stories of the blind being healed, his only two such stories. The first begins at ch8, v22, where Jesus puts saliva on the blind man's eyes and asks, 'can you see anything?' The man says that he sees people but his sight is fuzzy, they look like trees walking around. So Jesus lays hands on his eyes again and the man's vision became clear.

When Mark's gospel talks about sight, the gospel writer wraps up sight and insight with the one word. You might be able to see, but the real question is whether you understand in your soul, the things that you see with your eyes.

Physical sight is the beginning, and it is a means to an end. Not until you have insight, soul-clarity about who Jesus is and how you are to follow, do you fully see. By bracketing his section on growing discipleship in this way, Mark emphasizes spiritual insight as the goal for all people who would follow Jesus, from roadside beggars to Jesus' best friends. The healing episodes are placed here to alert us, Jesus' followers, to keep our eyes open for the ways of the kingdom that might otherwise elude us.

In your personal Bible study this week, you may want to read from the blind story at 8.22 through Bartimaeus's story ending at 10.52, to see how it all hangs together. Basically it's chapters 8 through 10, and it's a rich, jam-packed text which includes the transfiguration, Peter's great confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus predicting his death and resurrection three times, and more, all of it happening on a journey from Galilee toward Jerusalem.

After the encounter with the rich man who sought eternal life, while they were all walking along toward Jerusalem, Jesus predicted his coming brutal death a third time. It's the longest and most detailed of the three predictions. There's not much to say after that kind of statement; they keep on walking.

Next thing you know, James and John are catching up to chat. "Jesus, if we ask you a favor, will you do it for us? Every time I read this I hear in my head, a child asking, "mommy if I ask you something will you say yes?"

Jesus asked them, "What do you want me to do for you?"

Same question for Bartimaeus, 15 verses later.

Two different responses, however.

James and John had been with Jesus for a while; they were among the first disciples called. If anyone should have an idea what Jesus is about, it's these two. Yet here they are, asking for positions of honor in Jesus' administration—they want to be on his right and on his left when the accolades start to flow. *Did they hear* what he just said about dying? It doesn't seem like it.

There *were* two who had the positions at Jesus' right and his left when he came into his glory—Lk tells us that they were two thieves who taunted Jesus in his final hours, as they suffered the same death by crucifixion. That might not be what James & John thought they were asking for.

Mark keeps showing us people who ought to be able to see better than they do.

Then there's Bartimaeus. He heard that Jesus was passing by and called out to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" The crowd tried to shush him, and he called out even more urgently.

Jesus heard him. Over all of the noise of the crowd, he picked out that one insistent voice. He turned that direction and asked "What do you want me to do for you?"

Bartimaeus is the only person to be healed who has a name, and it means 'son of honor.' The irony is delicious: the disciples who should understand at least a little about Jesus ask for positions of honor; Bartimaeus, son of honor, asks only for his sight.

James and John make their request in relative privacy; were they a little embarrassed or self-conscious? Bartimaeus shouts his need for anyone to hear. He has nothing to lose and everything to gain in making his affliction known.

Jesus turns to both and asks, 'what can I do for you?' From the Sons of Thunder Jesus hears a selfish request for positions of honor. From Bartimaeus he hears one thing, a genuine need: Lord, have mercy on me, let me see. Unlike the rich man who wants to know what *he* can do, Bartimaeus knows that he can do nothing for himself, that he is totally dependent on God's mercy for healing.

Bartimaeus is a remarkable character, sitting there by the road, begging, his daily occupation. He heard it was Jesus coming and got louder than ever to attract his attention. It worked. Instead of ignoring him, the crowd amplified and relayed the message—Jesus is calling you.

This is the remarkable part. Bartimaeus, blind as he is, threw off his cloak and ran to Jesus!!!

\* \* \* Have you ever known a blind person? Imagine for a moment that you are blind, and you need to locate something simple in your home. Without benefit of your eyes, can you navigate safely from your living room to your desk and find your stapler or a permanent marker? And even if you could do that without tripping over a pair of shoes or yesterday's socks or the vacuum cleaner that wasn't put away, would you dare use a permanent marker or a stapler?

Now imagine having no sight, and tossing aside something as valuable as your cloak which is probably also your blanket for sleeping. How would you ever find it again? Would you throw it off and leave it behind along with the shopping cart that holds all your worldly goods?

Such depth of faith is expressed in that simple action! Even before he gains physical sight, Bart runs to Jesus as if he is already healed! He follows Jesus blindly, without regard for the concerns that were a legitimate part of his former

life. His action is a remarkable testimony of faith, when he jumps up and runs to Jesus. He responds to Jesus from his spiritual sight, and receives his physical sight as well.

Mk tells us that Bartimaeus 'followed Jesus on the way.' "The Way" is one of the names of the first community of people who were later called Christians – the Way. Bart got up from the side of the road, and joined Jesus on the road, the Way. That term, the Way, is sprinkled throughout Acts beginning with Saul's enlightenment in chapter 9.

Today's reading, this episode, closes this journey to Jerusalem. Next up is Palm Sunday, the entry into Jerusalem, then we are in the closing scenes of the gospel, the last days of Jesus' life. All this talk about discipleship and dying is not theoretical. It is real, with immediate implications.

Bartimaeus is a model of leaving it all behind for Jesus. Unlike the rich man whose possessions got in the way, nothing hinders his discipleship, not even his disability. He got up before he was healed, to follow Jesus. What will it take for each one of us to set aside anything that gets in our way, and follow Jesus on the way? What concerns are holding us back?

It's pretty easy for people to say that they follow Jesus because he made things right in their lives. Bartimaeus reversed that; he didn't wait. He went off blindly following, then found his healing also. He followed, and Jesus gave him his sight. Are we ready to follow Jesus like that, following his voice and finding our wholeness on the Way?