30th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Bartimaeus

A miracle. A dramatic healing. A blind person can see again. That certainly warms the heart. So, we could well be satisfied that this Gospel is the story of an amazing miracle. Isn’t Jesus the best miracle worker?!

The problem is, that isn’t what Mark had in mind at all. If anything, Mark had just the opposite in mind. He wants us to see beyond the physical miracle, to the real story. Here’s what I mean.

Remember when Jesus asked the disciples: “Who do people say that I am?”? The correct answer wasn’t “You are a great miracle worker”.

“Who is Jesus?” That was a big question the early church had to resolve. Who DO we say he is? Responding to that question, various ways of understanding his message and mission emerged. Some people in Mark’s day did see Jesus primarily as a miracle worker. They weren’t terribly interested in his passion and death; the Paschal mystery was just too hard to comprehend. So they were content with Jesus being a powerful God-man, like the Greek or Roman demi-gods; a man with special divine powers. That people could understand. After all, they heard about half human, half God heroes since childhood. Hercules. Perseus. Asclepius the healer.

Well, by the time Mark was writing, Paul had already put the cross center stage, and Mark totally agreed. Jesus was much more than a miracle worker. Jesus was the one sent by God to conquer the power of sin and death once and for all, for everyone. He wasn’t just the answer for people who received miracles, he is the answer for everyone. His real power was in the last supper, his death, his resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, leading us all through death to eternal life.

So the miracles Mark tells us about are not for show. They are about human need, having faith, encountering Jesus, and becoming a disciple. Deep human need, a faith that can grow day by day, encountering the Savior, and discipleship that leads, through life, to the cross, the paschal mystery, dying to self, and becoming a new person, with a new set of eyes. The previously blind man in our Gospel not only had 20/20 vision, he could see clearly to follow Jesus on the way. He became a disciple.

When Bartimaeus cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me,” was the real issue needing an eye specialist? I don’t think so. Blindness was a problem, but not the biggest one. What about living on the side of the road, isolated, pushed to the side, as the world passed by? What about a life whose sole meaning was begging to get by? What about being looked down on to such a degree that when you cry out for help, everyone tells you to be quiet?

While we heard Bartimaeus say: “Master, I want to see.” I hear more than just ‘fix my eye trouble.’ I hear: “I don’t just want to see the palm trees and the sand. I want to see some meaning to life, purpose. A reason to get up in the morning. I want to see a path to a different life than the one I’m living.” There is the human need in the equation.

What about faith? Faith is what lead Bartimaeus to call out. Faith isn’t having all the answers, it is having the courage and wisdom to seek them. Faith is what kept Bartimaeus calling out when
folks were telling him to be quiet. Faith is what led him to throw aside his cloak, spring to his feet, and go to Jesus.

What did the encounter with Jesus lead to? Jesus affirmed and reinforced the seeds of faith that led Bartimaeus call out. Jesus asked about his needs, not because he didn’t know what the man needed, but so Bartimaeus could identify and name his real need. Most of all, the encounter opened Bartimaeus’ eyes. When I say opened his eyes, the greatest wonder was not the physical cure, but the spiritual one. Bartimaeus could see that the path to salvation was to follow Jesus on the way. Living a life centered on trust of the Father, a life giving relationship. Loving as Jesus loved. Changing the world through forgiveness. Centering in hope. Ultimately, salvation was following on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the tomb, and to resurrection.

Jesus didn’t tell Bartimaeus: “Your faith cured your blindness”. No, he said: “your faith saved you.” And what did Bartimaeus do in response? He followed him on the way.

I believe Jesus is inviting us to step into the story.

Are we ever just stuck on the side of the road, while others, and real life are passing us by? Going through the motions, but not really living? Stuck on the side of the road may not be just sitting in front of a cloak, begging. We can be very busy, but stuck all the same.

Don’t let the crowd tell us to stay where we are. Find the little kernel of faith inside. Use it, call out to Jesus, and it can save us. If he asks “what do you want me to do for you”, don’t give a quick surface answer. Look deep. What do I really want? What could transform my life? Spiritual sight is never a bad thing to ask for. Or put another way: “Lord, please show me the way. Show me the way to a life that overflows with mercy, with love, with forgiveness, and with hope as your life did. As your life still does in the life of your followers.”

We can still discover what Bartimaeus did. Add a serious look at our deepest need, a bit of faith and courage to call out, an encounter with Jesus, and the path to life is bound to open up.

We come together every Sunday so that we can take that look inside. We do it right at the beginning with the penitential act. It isn’t meant to be simply an examination of conscience. It’s a moment to acknowledge our need to call out to Jesus: “Lord, have mercy.” Each week the readings help us look at what we might best ask for, showing us what others have found that gave them life.


This is the place that helps us realize we need to find the way, and then leads us together on the way.