

### **“Insight, Outsight” – Mk 10:46-52 – Oct 29/06**

Today we have the privilege to look at Jesus’ last healing miracle before entering Jerusalem in triumph, the healing of “Blind Bartimaeus.” Here we see the healing miracle that, along with the healing of another blind man, provides a pair of bookends to a significant part of Jesus’ ministry.

These two healing incidents, the unknown man by the pool in Bethsaida, and Bartimaeus here just before the entry into Jerusalem, bracket and frame the three times that Jesus told his disciples about his coming arrest, and trial, and death, and rising again from death. These two miracles enclose the transfiguration of Jesus, the time on the mountain when in the company of Moses and Elijah Jesus’ was somehow changed. These two miracles mark the beginning and end of a phase where Jesus taught his disciples much about how to live in the faith, and how important children and their pure faith are in God’s kingdom, and how grasping for positions of importance are the exact opposite of his call to serve.

But for all that these two healing miracles work together to surround and highlight perhaps the most significant part of Jesus’ ministry on the way to the cross in Jerusalem, there are huge differences between them. In the first healing incident, the man at the pool in Bethsaida is anonymous, unnamed – but in the second healing incident the man is not only named but identified by family connection, quite possibly well-known in Mark’s church. The first miracle reflects the private nature of the early part of Jesus’ ministry, with the man being taken aside to be healed in private, and sent on his way with an injunction not even to go into the village. We don’t know if he followed those instructions because that’s where we lose sight of him. By way of contrast in a rare public healing, Bartimaeus regains his sight right before the eyes of the disciples and the crowds accompanying Jesus. He too is told to go on his way, but instead he joins the noisy throng.

We note also the distinction between the “traditional” medicine approach used by Jesus on the first blind man, using saliva for the first attempt and then touching him to bring things into sharp focus on the second pass, as compared with the healing of Bartimaeus that took only a declaration from Jesus that “your faith has made you well”. This shift in Jesus’ healing power is important, for it eases the fears of people by demonstrating that the physical touching by Jesus was no longer necessary for healing. It would be natural for Christians in those early days to feel a bit like they had “just missed the parade”, that they were just a little too late to catch Jesus, to be touched by Jesus while he walked among them. They, and we, are reassured that Jesus was and is able to respond to prayer with a simple declaration of “let it be so.”

There is another important difference between the two healing incidents, however, and that is the emphasis on Bartimaeus regaining sight that had been lost, of having his vision not only renewed but restored. It becomes clear, especially after the shabby ways that the disciples reacted to Jesus’ predictions of his suffering and death, that even Jesus’ closest followers had become blind themselves, and needed their insight restored. The contrast is made even clearer in this second healing that the blind have been made to see, but even those closest to Jesus, even his disciples, could not see what was happening even as they watched it happen. Indeed the crowd even tried to silence the blind beggar Bartimaeus, as he, with magnificent insight, called out to Jesus naming him as messiah. The blind could see Jesus as the messiah, those who were not blind could not see him that way. They had “outsight” – they could see what was around them – but they had lost their “insight” – they couldn’t see the messiah’s true role.

Of course, losing track of the goal in Christ is something that we as people do best, isn’t it? Failing to keep an eye on the goal, the target, the end, the prize, the objective is one of our most common failings. Sometimes it’s because we are so busy keeping our nose to the grindstone that we

fail to look up, we get so absorbed into the day-to-day details that we lose sight of what we are working for. Occasionally the goal, the target gets obscured by others, crowding in on us so that we can no longer see to the horizon. Lots of times the goal is obscured by a phalanx of banners and placards being waved by others, each promoting their own cause and trying to get us to subscribe to it, and the goals that Christ would have us aim for become hidden. The placards of our secular society can easily form a forest thick enough to obscure any goal – buy this, support that, endorse the other, be distracted at any of the zillions of pleasant oases on the way to your objective – “weapons of mass distraction” as I recently read.

Worse even than the placards and banners obscuring our goal are the deliberate fogs of deception designed to cloud our goal, so that our goal may be shifted while we can't see it. The usual fog generators at the highest level of politics come immediately to mind, powered by corruption, and even evil intent deliberately masked in the disguise of piety, as patriotism and faith are swirled together by spin doctors until many people can no longer tell which goal they are aiming for (which is, of course, the goal of the masterful political fog generators!).

And of course this kind of deliberate obscuring of goals by contradictory statements and even outright lies about motives is by no means limited to the political arenas, it is also a mainstay of the corporate world. Mind you, there it is called ‘advertising’ or ‘public relations’, and is often seen as a very good thing, but the effect is the same, to shift people's goals, and if it takes a little (or a lot) of deception to do that, well, that's just business, isn't it?

But the most disappointing place of all where we find the goalposts being obscured and then shifted is in the church. Oh yes, we're not immune. I think we've all seen examples of church leaders hiding a personal agenda with a smokescreen of platitudes, or misusing biblical texts to bend the congregation's will to suit personal goals.

Not all of the reasons for losing track of the goal can be laid upon the deception of others, however, for we are all perfectly able to do that to ourselves. From the disciples on down to us, people have been able to distract themselves and deceive themselves until they were blind to the goals to which Christ calls us. The disciples were there to see it all but they were blind to it, is the message from these healing miracles.

But that is only part of the story, for there is a message of grace and redemption as well. Bartimaeus shows us that not only could the blind begin to see again, but they became disciples. The man in Bethsaida, while told to tell no-one, not only could not keep the results of the miracle to himself but proclaimed who had done the miracle because we can still read about it two thousand years later. Even though the disciples could not, would not see the real power of Jesus as the true Messiah of God until their eyes were finally opened by his resurrection, both their faithfulness and the grace, power and mercy of the one to whom they, and we, give our faith is still visible today. Jesus was able to restore the vision of Bartimaeus with a word; Jesus is still able to restore our vision with his word. We along with our Christian sisters and brothers in the early church are reassured that we did not miss the parade into Jerusalem, we did not miss a one-time chance to be touched by Jesus. We take comfort that Christ can open our eyes as effortlessly today as he did that day between Jericho and Jerusalem.

But we also need to understand that it was not enough for Bartimaeus to merely call out in faith to Jesus. Certainly his faith was enough reason for him to be healed, but note that Jesus called for him to come, and Bartimaeus responded and came to Jesus, who then asked him “what do you want me to do for you?” We, having responded and come before Jesus are also asked by him the same question, “what do you want me to do for you?” Can there be a more powerful reminder of the power of prayer, and to pray powerfully, and to ask with bold assurance for what we want? If our answer to Jesus' question is “nothing”, well maybe that's what we'll get. I would encourage you not to use the timid

self-effacing word ‘just’ in your prayers – you know the expression, “Lord, we just ask that you ...” When I hear some of the laundry lists of prayer for others I’m reminded of that classic stereotype of the beauty pageant contestant ending a wish list with “... oh, yes, and World Peace.” “What do you want me to do for you?”, Jesus asks. Tell him. It’s OK to let him know what you want for you. Step out as boldly in your faith as Bartimaeus did, ask for what you want, secure and comfortable in the assurance that if it is appropriate and helpful, you will receive it.

Of course, be careful what you pray for, because you will probably get it. So ask for help in knowing where and what the goal should be. Seek God’s help in figuring out how to get there. Request that the Holy Spirit help you through the trouble spots on the road to the goal, and provide a fresh breeze to blow away the fogs that others would use to obscure that goal.

The final piece to take away from this healing miracle is to note again that Bartimaeus joined the others on the way. Mark’s use of “on the way” is more than just “he tagged along”, or “he went along with the crowd”. For him that expression, “on the way” means joining fully in the journey to the cross, and so we have a model of someone healed by Jesus jumping right in, participating fully in the life of the church from its founding. Certainly Bartimaeus must have had a role in helping to define what that church would look like, what would be its focus, how it would function. And as our eyes are opened by Jesus, we too are invited to come along “on the way”, to jump right in, to tell others what we see as being the goal, the target, the emphasis, the mission, the vision. The ongoing contribution of each person whose eyes have been opened helps to renew, to refresh, to revalidate the vision of the group. In the meantime, as we continue to learn and to grow, may one of our answers to Christ’s question to us, “what would you have me do for you?” is a request that we be given sight and insight, that we be able to see clearly what Christ would have us do for him, that our vision would be constantly renewed, that we might serve to God’s glory.