

“And Followed Him” – Mk 10:46-52 – Oct 28/12

We’re on the “home stretch” in the church year, with the beginning of Advent only five weeks away! Today as we approach that milestone we 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 the second in 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 important 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, giving us a strong hint that he had become well-known in the 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 “Son of David” or in other words, the Messiah. In a stunning paradox the blind could see Jesus as the messiah, those who were not blind could not see him that way.

Of course, losing sight of the goal in Christ is something that we as people do best, isn’t it? Failing to keep an eye on 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 in day-to-day details that we lose sight of what we are working for. Occasionally our lack of vision results from others crowding in on us so that we can no longer see to the horizon. Sometimes our vision is obscured by banners and placards being waved by others, each promoting their own cause while obscuring the goals that Christ would have us aim for. The distractions of our secular society can easily form a forest thick enough to obscure any goal – buy this, support that, endorse the other, tarry a while at any of the zillions of pleasant oases on the way to your objective. The world of politics often offers deliberate fogs of deception designed to cloud our goals, so that our goal may be shifted while we can't see it. But the most disappointing place of all where we find the goalposts being obscured and then shifted is in the church. Sadly some of the most masterful uses of smokescreens of platitudes or abuse of biblical texts to suit personal goals can be found within the church.

However, not all of the reasons for losing track of the goal can be laid upon the deception of others, because 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. This healing miracle reveals clearly to us that although the disciples were there to see with their own eyes God's grace at work in Christ, still they were blind to it.

But that is only part of the story, for there is a message of grace and redemption as well. Not only did Bartimaeus regain his sight, that gift of grace permitted him to see the way he was being called to follow. "On the way" is a term that Mark used often and with a very specific meaning. "On the way" in this gospel doesn't mean just heading on down the road, but instead carries the intentional burden of understanding that this particular way led to the cross, and by implication to the resurrection. The earliest Christians were not called Christians but "people of the Way." John's gospel echoes that understanding through quoting Jesus as claiming, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

So while this closing bookend story is a healing miracle in which Bartimaeus regains his sight, it is also the story of calling the last disciple on the way to the cross. Just as early in Jesus' ministry he called Peter and the other fishermen and they dropped their nets, their boats, their lifestyles and followed him, so too here does this blind beggar abandon all he knew and followed Jesus. I'm certain that during the endless days of sitting at the gates of the city, depending upon the charity of others, Bartimaeus must have time and time again dreamed of all the things he would do if only he could see again. Visit friends, sit in the pub, play cribbage, take a Mediterranean cruise, watch the sun rise and set. But here, having experienced the miracle he longed for, and even asked for, Bartimaeus instead uses that gift of grace to respond to the one who made it come true. Not only could he see Jesus as the Messiah, he could now see the way to follow him, and follow Jesus he did.

Jesus was able to restore the vision of Bartimaeus with a word; Jesus is still able to restore our vision with his word. Along with our Christian sisters and brothers in the early church we too 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 also responded come before Jesus and 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. Please try not to use the timid self-effacing word 'just' in your prayers – you know the expression, "Lord, we just ask that you ..." as if

we were afraid to bother him. “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. But of course, be careful what you pray for, because you just might very well get it!

The final piece to take away from this healing miracle is to note once again that Bartimaeus joined the others on the way. He didn’t merely “tag along” or “go along with the crowd.” He joined fully in the journey to the cross, jumping right in, participating fully in the life of the church right from its very founding. Bartimaeus, having had his eyes opened, 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 with renewed insight in faith helps to renew, to refresh, to revalidate the vision of the group. In the meantime let our answer to Christ’s question to us, “what would you have me do for you?” be 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 see the way to serve to God’s glory.