

23rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.27.24

Jeremiah 31:7-9

For thus says the Lord: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O Lord, your people, the remnant of Israel." See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Mark 10:46-52

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way. (292)

This slip of a story. It's a tiny thing, the last encounter Jesus has with anyone outside the Temple, the last encounter before the last week of Jesus' life.

They are coming to Jericho, from which they will go up to Jerusalem. Jesus will enter the Holy City in strange triumph, riding a donkey (and not a stallion), lauded by peasants (and not soldiers). Leaves and cloaks will line his path as if these made it all somehow impressive.

Within days, he would be arrested, questioned, crucified.

Just prior to all that, Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus.

Which, funny thing, "*bar*" in someone's name means "son," so "Bartimaeus" (his name) means son of Timaeus, which the story then goes to explain about him, as if this clarifies who this man is rather than simply repeats what's already been said.

What this *does* do, though, is create a mirroring, the story emphasizing this man as a son, and this man identifying Jesus as a son. The Son of David, he twice calls Jesus.

This isn't a title we see otherwise in the Gospel of Mark, so it stands out here even more.

Of course, Jesus will complicate this son-ship in but a few days. He was like David, a chip off the ole block, except in all the ways he wasn't.

David was the great king of Israel and Judah, the great warrior who brought these two nations together into a United Kingdom. His rule, nine centuries earlier, would be (would always be) remembered in heroic terms.

Jesus, though. He'd be understood as following in the Davidic line. But he'd also complicate that story. Jesus' kingship wouldn't be about military might or powerful rule. His would be about serving, the greatest of all, he would even explain to his disciples, being the servant of all.

His moments-from-now entry into Jerusalem would illustrate this contrast. His "triumphal entry" into the city of David would evoke the way of kings, but only to invite a contrast. (A donkey, not a stallion. A beast of burden, not a warhorse. Funny,

if not pathetic,

if not dangerously provocative.

Is he making fun?

That alone could get you crucified...)

So, here are two sons meeting one another, which continues in the theme of these latest three chapters of Mark's gospel, these just prior to his week-long Passion. These follow when Jesus has called and commissioned the twelve, the apostles, whom he then sent out in pairs. They would teach and heal and work wonders, just like Jesus. Then they'd return and talk of what they did. And once everyone was accustomed to this new authority, Jesus, in this middle section of the gospel narrative, would begin to teach them about the larger point of this whole venture, that is, the cross. This wouldn't simply be about working wonders. This would be about the cross, its shame, its strange glory. He would teach them that, see, he was going to Jerusalem and there he would be handed over to the Gentiles, and they would mock him and flog him and spit on him, and at last they would kill him, and on the third day he would rise again.

Three times in this section Jesus teaches this—these three times being the through-line for this middle section of Mark's gospel. Three times teaching this—this most impossible thing, this most confounding thing. And three times someone from Jesus' inner circle would have the absolute wrong response. Peter would hear it, that first time Jesus spoke of it, and he would move to prevent it from happening: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" James and John would hear it, that third time Jesus spoke of it, and they would aim to get the best seats with Jesus in his glory, one at his right hand and one at his left—not able to imagine that to be on his right side and on his left is to be on a cross, two thieves rather taking that place. The middle time

Jesus would speak of it had all the twelve in a state of misunderstanding or non-hearing, now arguing among themselves as to who was the greatest.

And framing it all was Jesus' healing two blind men. Framing this middle section of Mark's gospel is Jesus' making two blind men to see. The earlier healing happened in stages, the blind man given sight at first just enough to see people but have them look like "trees walking." This time, the healing happens all at once, "immediately," in fact, as Mark imagines so much of what Jesus effected—immediately. And this not because of anything Jesus did. Unlike the earlier time, there's no mud or spittle or Jesus laying hands on him. There's just the encounter, which Bartimaeus (son of Timaeus) himself brought about, he whose *faith* has made him well.

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus would ask him, echoing his asking James and John this same thing. They had said to Jesus as they walked along the way, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you," and he had said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" The two disciples, for their part, their (turns out) erroneous part, wanted glory, though not by way of the cross. This one, this blind one, Bartimaeus: he wants restoration, to see again.

So, he receives it, restoration. He receives his sight, and his response to it is to throw off his cloak, his perhaps only possession, which is yet another contrast to someone else recent in the story, the man with many possessions who couldn't dispossess himself of them in order freely to follow Jesus. Upon his rather forced encounter with Jesus, running up to him—*running!*—he had asked about how to inherit eternal life. And, upon hearing it, that all he had to do was give away all his possessions and then come to follow Jesus, he searched himself, and likely imagined his many possessions and the sense of security and self-sufficiency they gave him (though deceptively so); and he realized he'd rather have things than relationship, he'd rather have possessions than be possessed if though by a Holy Spirit.

No, Bartimaeus: he throws off his cloak and follows Jesus from here, follows in the way from here. Up to Jerusalem, through the city gate, and into Jesus' final week.

This means that one of the first things he might have seen with his newly restored sight is the cross, Jesus hanging from it, the one thing the disciples refused until now to see, to imagine, truly and rightly to hear Jesus speaking of in some understanding now of its implications. But this man saw it all, or the story would have us assume.

And it wouldn't be a surprise if he regretted this restoration. If this is the world he would now be able to see, then it wouldn't be a surprise at all if he came to prefer blindness. Some people do, figuratively anyway. If what there is to see in the world is suffering and an utterly

thoroughgoing need for redemption, some people will prefer blindness, an anesthetic of some sort—diversion, amusement, inebriation, domination that protects the one in power from ever having to set feet on the ground in some actual encounter. But I doubt such was the case for Bartimaeus. Nearly naked now, he seems to have been ready for the real, following in the way.

That's what the story would have us assume, anyway. Consider again his being a son, presented as a son, and evoking also Jesus' status as a son. This casts him among an even larger lot in this gospel narrative. This middle section, especially, features a lot of sons, a lot of daughters. Like, the ruler who went to Jesus on behalf of his dying daughter in order that she might be saved—which she was. Or like the man who went to Jesus on behalf of his (apparently epileptic) son that he might be healed—which she was. Or like the Syrophonecian woman who went on behalf of her daughter that she might be healed—which she was; or the woman who went to Jesus on her own behalf, touched the hem of Jesus' cloak so to be healed—which she was, and whom he then called "Daughter." Then there was the whole crowd who kept gathering around Jesus and whom he, in teaching them, called them time and again, "Children. Children." Even James and John, asking to be seated next to Jesus, are called according to the story "the sons of Zebedee."

What's more, in this middle section Jesus twice exalts children, these who are little else but someone's daughters, someone's sons. Once: "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Another time: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." People, these children, who are wholly understood in their relation to other people, indeed utterly reliant on other people. For who are children in the world but people who have, or need, parents? Who are children in common understanding but people dependent upon adults, grown-ups? To be a child in the world is to be in a dependent relationship with someone else on the world—which, such dependency will make you worthless in this world, and vulnerable to abuse, perhaps especially in the ancient world. But not in the kingdom of God.

Contrast this, Mark our writer seems to want us to do, which already we have done, with the man who encounters Jesus as in relation to nothing but his own possessions, the man whom we heard of a couple weeks ago in church. He's the only one in this section of Mark's gospel to appear in terms of a solitary individual, as in relation only to the things of his wealth, who moreover couldn't bring himself to follow Jesus because it came at the demand of dispossessing himself of his things. He could have had relationship. He chose rather to have things. And it had him going away shocked and grieving.

Bartimaeus couldn't be more different if he tried, willing indeed to throw off his one of two possessions in order more lightly and freely to follow.

Mark wants us to notice this. There's scholarly consensus on this point if few others: Mark wants us to notice this contrast, and to decide which will be our response to the same invitation.

This slip of a story, slipped in as a last encounter before Jesus existential encounter with the authorities of his day, religious, imperial, condemning and crucifying. This slip of a story slipped in as to ask which it will be for us. Possessing or relating? Keeping or freeing? Self-sufficiency or self-giving?

Which will it be?

Thanks be to God.