

Blind Faith, Visible Discipleship

Mark 10:45-52
October 29, 2006

I.

We are at a transition in the Mark's Gospel. In today's reading Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and to the cross is ending. He's almost there. Our reading next week skips to that fateful Passover week, and describes Jesus' encounters with scribes and Sadducees in the days before his death.

So, today's reading marks the end of an important time for Jesus and his disciples. At first glance it might not seem much different from other stories of Jesus' miracles. On the surface it gives an account of how Jesus restored the sight of a blind beggar, but there is more to it than might appear on the surface. It's about more than just a healing. The reading also can serve as a point of departure for how we might understand the meaning of faith and how we might fulfill our own call to discipleship as we await the coming of God's kingdom.

And in thinking about faith, I'm reminded of the story about the Christian man who got a job in a lumber camp that was regarded as a pretty rough place. There was not much religion there. Most of the lumberjacks in the camp had never seen the inside of a church, and on Sunday morning they usually were sleeping off their hangovers.

One day this fellow told a friend about his new job, and his friend, who knew about the lumber camp, expressed some concern. The friend said "you're going to be in for a hard time if those lumberjacks ever find out you're a Christian." "I know, I know," said the man, "but it can't be helped. I need the job."

Several months later the two men happened to meet again. The friend asked the fellow, "Well, how's it going, did those lumberjacks give you any problems because you are a Christian?" "Oh no," said the man, "No problems at all, they never found out."

What's wrong with that picture? The faith of the so-called Christian really wasn't much faith after all, was it? Faith is not something that you turn off and on like a light switch. If blind Bartimaeus in today's reading had only the faith of our friend in the lumber camp, he probably would have spent the rest of his life begging beside the road.

II.

Let's look further at this reading from Mark. We heard about how Bartimaeus continued to cry out to Jesus even though the crowd tried to make him be quiet. We heard how Jesus stopped and summoned him forward. And we heard how Jesus then asked him what he wanted.

Then came the important parts. Bartimaeus, who was a beggar, could have asked for money, or food, or any of the things for which he normally would beseech people to give him as he sat along the road. But this time was different. This time he asked Jesus to give him his sight.

This was not a typical request. I'm sure Bartimaeus did not spend his days sitting along the road with outstretched hands asking people to give him his sight. He would have appealed for things within the realm of possibility. But with Jesus everything was different. Bartimaeus had never met Jesus, and yet believed that with Jesus a gift of his sight was possible. Why was this?

Well, look at how Bartimaeus spoke to Jesus. First, he called him Son of David. This was enormously significant. Jewish scripture prophesied that the long awaited Messiah would come from the line of David, and thus it appears that Bartimaeus understood even more about Jesus than some of the disciples. And then he addressed Jesus with a title that sometimes was used in messianic settings. He said, "Master, let me receive my sight."

Somehow, Bartimaeus believed. For reasons that cannot be explained he understood better than most who Jesus was, and he had confidence that Jesus could give him his sight. Bartimaeus had faith. Without any reliable evidence, without any material proof, something in Bartimaeus made him believe. Something made him trust in Jesus.

And then when Jesus healed him, he said "your faith has made you well." Note that Jesus did not say anything that indicated he, in his own power, caused the healing. Instead, he said that the gift of healing was received through Bartimaeus' faith.

Now, this might seem like a minor point because Jesus certainly had the power to heal whenever he wanted to do so. But that is not what he usually did in the Gospels. In most cases his healing gifts were received by the faith of those who were healed. Those who actually were healed usually believed there was something special about Jesus.

Then, at the end of the Gospel, St. Mark told us that as soon as Bartimaeus received his sight he began to follow Jesus along the way. So we see that Bartimaeus' faith also led him to discipleship. His response to Jesus was living testimony to the instruction Jesus had been giving to the other disciples all along.

This is nice little gospel reading, isn't it? No one is called to do anything difficult. No one is challenged to a higher standard. There are no hard words to explain, and the good guy comes out on top. It's a neat package that can make us feel good. We can think, "well, that's the way things are supposed to be. Maybe something nice will happen to me." End of story. Right?

III.

Not necessarily. While the story might end with Bartimaeus following Jesus into Jerusalem, its theological significance lives on and can affect us today. I mentioned earlier that there is more to this reading than might appear on the surface.

When we deal with the matter of faith, and when we try to understand how faith can sustain us in our lives, we also must consider the nature of the world in which we live and how it can seem that sometimes the good guy does not come out on top.

For example, in the context of what happened to Bartimaeus, it is important to be cautious about proclaiming that if we have faith we will be healed because it can lead some people to the erroneous belief that if they are not healed, then they do not have sufficient faith.

Believe it or not I have heard preachers proclaim this type of doctrine. But it is wrong, and is a perversion of the Gospel. And rather than helping people it can prevent them from seeking God in prayer in times of illness or distress.

The point here is that true faith does not always work the way we think it should work. Faith, by definition, describes something that we cannot explain in human terms. If we could explain it, if we did fully understand it, then it wouldn't be faith.

Perhaps another story can illustrate this truth. A Christian was shipwrecked on a desert island, and after searching the island he found enough food to sustain him for a few months, and he was able to build a small shelter from some driftwood and other scraps on the beach. He knew he could survive for a while, and had faith that God would deliver him from his situation.

Then one day, after walking around the island, he returned to his shelter only to find it engulfed in flames. All that he had was destroyed. His shelter was gone, his food supply was gone, and he had nothing. In despair he cried out, "God, how could you do this to me, and he collapsed on the beach and finally, exhausted by his desperation, he fell asleep.

Several hours later he was awakened by the sound of large engines, and saw a boat coming for him. When his rescuers arrived he asked them, "how did you know I was here?" They replied, "we saw your smoke signal."

So we see that we cannot instruct God how to help us. The shipwrecked sailor never would have intentionally set fire to his shelter and destroyed his food supply by acting on faith. But that is exactly what saved him. God blesses us in ways that we don't expect. Certainly we can place our prayers before him, but sometimes they are not answered in the way we hope. The only prayer that never fails is that God's will be done.

IV.

At this point you might be wondering how all this relates to Bartimaeus on the road from Jericho. The answer is that we can look at today's Gospel and see how Jesus' miracles give us a glimpse of the coming kingdom. What happened to Bartimaeus was a preview of the age to come when the troubles of this age will have disappeared. His restoration to health and wholeness signifies our own restoration to what God intended for humanity from the beginning.

The Gospels divide time into two periods. They are this age, which includes the worldly past, present and future, and the age to come, which is the future God has planned for us at the end of history. And the Gospels place these two ages in tension. They tell us that God's kingdom is already here because it began with Jesus during his earthly ministry. But they also tell us that God's kingdom is not yet fully here because that will not happen until Christ comes again.

Thus, we live in an age of "already but not yet." The Prince of Peace has already come, but God's peace at the end of time is not yet here. Jesus' miracles in this age were glimpses of what we might expect in the age to come, and the Holy Spirit came to sustain and guide us until that time. We are living in a time when our salvation is complete because of the cross, and we are living in a time when evil, violence, and apostasy still are evident because the final kingdom is not yet here.

V.

So, we live in a broken world, and that means broken things happen. Just as the earthly Jesus on the cross felt forsaken just before he died, so also we at times wonder where God is in our lives. If only good things happened to good people then the kingdom already would be here, and we know that's not yet the case.

We, like Bartimaeus, are called to have faith, knowing that some people will be healed and some will not; knowing that some people will prosper and others will not; and knowing that some prayers will be answered and some will not, at least according to our expectations.

And we, like Bartimaeus, are called to discipleship knowing there are costs in this age but eternal rewards in the age to come. Our faith will save us because at times it is all we have, but it always is sufficient.

Our faith tells us that we are God's creation and we can take comfort knowing that in his righteousness he will care for those who call upon his name.

Our faith tells us that we also are Jesus' flock, and we can trust that his intercessions will deliver us from the perils of this age into the promises of the next.

And finally, We know that through our baptism the Holy Spirit is within us, and that we always can be sustained if we truly listen to that small still voice that speaks to us now just as it must have spoken to Bartimaeus centuries ago when Jesus approached. *Amen.*