

First and Last

In the name of Great King David's greater Son, dear friends in Christ: today's Gospel reading gives the account of Bartimaeus, a blind man whose sight was restored by Jesus. To fully appreciate this text of Holy Scripture, I think it best that we see it in contrast to a Gospel lesson we had a few weeks back. So, let me set this up:

Jesus has spent the winter months laying low, so to speak. The last time he was in Jerusalem he had a major confrontation with the religious leaders there. They wanted to kill him then and there because of some of the claims he made. They couldn't do it. It was one of those occasions when we're told he that he simply passed through and walked away from his enemies, with them parting like the waters of the Red Sea before Moses. But now it's springtime. And Jesus is on his way back to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. It will be his last. He's told his disciples that upon arrival he will be arrested, condemned by the religious authorities, and put to death. They don't understand it at this point, but he will be fulfilling the ultimate Passover. The first time, the event the Passover commemorated, was when the Lord God delivered his people from Egyptian slavery by the blood of lambs and the death of the firstborn. This time the Lord God will deliver his people from slavery to sin and death by the death of *his* firstborn and only-begotten Son and the blood of the Lamb of God poured out to take away the sins of the world. Jesus has an appointment with destiny in order to fulfill the mission for which he was sent.

Not long after setting out on this journey, a rich young man came running up to Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him, "You know the commandments: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, honor your father and mother, and so on ... Do these things and you will live". The fellow had a pretty high opinion of himself. Blind to his faults, he replied, "Yes, yes, sure. I've already done all that. What do I yet lack?"

Isn't that interesting? He believed that he had kept all the commandments and still had the nagging doubt that it wasn't enough. He was right about that second part anyway. He hadn't done enough – but it was precisely because he hadn't kept the commandments to the level of perfection God requires; not even close.

Then we're told, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him". The guy was sincere; just sincerely wrong. Jesus knew that what he needed was some tough love. He had to help the man to see the truth about himself. So, to open his eyes, Jesus said, "Yes, you lack one thing. Go sell all that you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow me. You will have treasures in heaven." The episode closes with the man going away from Jesus sad and disheartened. He was so attached to his great wealth that didn't want to part with it.

Now, please understand that Jesus was not saying that to inherit eternal life everyone must give away all their possessions and become a full time disciple. No, his purpose was to show the young man that he cared more about his life and comforts in this world than he did about eternal life in the next; that he had, in fact, made a false god of his money and that he did not truly love his neighbor as himself as the Law requires. The man had to see that he was not really keeping the law of God as he believed; that he was a sinner who couldn't inherit life by his own power, effort, or reason; that what he needed was not another thing to do to inherit life, but rather a Savior from sin. His story is left hanging. We don't know what became of him. We can

only hope that by the Word of Jesus and the working of his Holy Spirit through that Word the man came to see his faults and his need for the Savior that God sent in his Son.

But now we come to today's lesson. Jesus is still on the way to his appointment with destiny in Jerusalem. To get there he has to pass through the city of Jericho which is in the Jordan River Valley some 24 miles east of the Jewish capital. It's as Jesus is leaving Jericho accompanied by his disciples and a sizable crowd of other pilgrims going to the Passover that he has his encounter with blind Bartimaeus.

Here's a fellow who is used to having his hand out. In ancient times there wasn't much a blind person could do to earn a proper living. They were reduced to begging coins from strangers and passersby. The fact that we're told that he later asks to have his sight *restored* tells us that he wasn't always blind, but that due to some injury or disease he lost his vision. From that we can infer that he once had a normal, productive life, and could support himself and a family if he had one. But not now. Now he is reduced to dependence on others. It's a hard way to make a living. The comforts of hearth and home he once enjoyed are long past. He survives on scraps. Rarely if ever does he not feel the gnaw of hunger in his belly.

I imagine, though, that for the past few days his pickings have been above average. All the Passover pilgrims from Galilee and beyond the Jordan have to come by the place he's stationed himself. There's only one road out of town that leads up the steep winding way to where Jerusalem sits comfortably on the Judean highlands. And so here Bartimaeus squats in the dust waiting. He knows that people heading to a religious festival tend to be a bit more generous than they would be when traveling for normal business purposes. These pilgrims trickle by in small groups. When Bartimaeus hears their feet on the path he begins repeating his plaintive mantra, "Pity a poor, blind man! Have mercy on me!" Once in a while he is rewarded by hearing the sound of a small coin land in his clay bowl. Then he chants, "Oh! God be praised! He will surely bless you for your kindness!"

But now he hears a much noisier commotion approaching. It's the large group consisting of Jesus, his disciples, and a substantial crowd of others who are accompanying the now famous rabbi and prophet from Galilee. They're excited. They're expecting big things to happen when they arrive at their destination. They chatter among themselves like fans at a ball game, and shout out comments and questions to Jesus trying to attract his attention.

Bartimaeus tugs on the hem of someone's tunic as it brushes past his face. "What's all this about? What's going on?" The person replies angrily, "Let go of me and be quiet, you blind fool! It's Jesus of Nazareth. He's passing by."

Bartimaeus has heard of Jesus. Who hasn't? Everybody is talking about him. But obviously he's never seen Jesus or any of the miracles that he's performed. Based on the reports he has heard, though, Bartimaeus has come to the conclusion that this Jesus is none other than the fulfillment of all of the Lord's promises to his people, the long expected Messiah, the son of David who is to rule over the house of Jacob forever. He knows that he has only this brief moment to capture his attention. In a matter of seconds, he'll be gone. He begins to shout above the throng of voices that surround Jesus who is in the middle of the crowd. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

The people in Bartimaeus' immediate vicinity aren't very helpful or sympathetic to his plight. They try to silence him. Bartimaeus won't be so easily shrugged off. This is his chance. He's going to take it. He cries out all the louder, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" It works.

Jesus stands still. The crowd behind him collides and scrunches up like an accordion. A hush falls on them. All eyes are on Jesus who says, "Call him." Suddenly those near Bartimaeus are more sympathetic. It's almost as if kindness is contagious. They tell him, "Cheer up. It's your lucky day. Jesus is calling you."

The blind man casts off his filthy outer garment. He is guided to Jesus through the crowd that makes way for him. Now he's face to face with Jesus who asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's a valid question. The man is a beggar. Perhaps all he wants is a handful of coins. But no, Bartimaeus asks to have his sight restored. He firmly believes that Jesus can do what no medicine or doctor or surgeon or any other human can. Jesus grants his request. The eyes of the blind are opened. And when Jesus tells him, "Go your way. Your faith has saved you", Bartimaeus follows Jesus.

That's his story. We want to contrast the thoughts and actions of Bartimaeus with the young fellow we heard about earlier. One was rich in the things of this world, the other had little to nothing. The first was blind to his faults, the latter blind physically – but very much aware of his needs. The first came running up to Jesus on his own initiative, the latter was led to Jesus when he was called by him. The first presented himself to Jesus dressed in the finery befitting his high station, the latter appeared before Jesus wearing only a soiled loincloth; the first in pride and self-confidence, the second in humility. The young man came asking what he could do; Bartimaeus came begging Jesus for what only he could do. The first man came spiritually blind and left that way. The latter came to Jesus with spiritual insight and gained physical sight as well. The first, told to follow Jesus, turned his back on him and left in a state of sorrow and depression. Bartimaeus, told to go his own way, full of joy, decided that his way from now on was to follow Jesus. And follow Jesus he did to Jerusalem – to where the cross awaited; yes, the cross, the tomb, and his glorious resurrection on the third day.

Our Lord Jesus said that in his kingdom the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Certainly that was the case for the rich young man and blind Bartimaeus. May the Lord in his mercy make us like the last that we too may follow Jesus joyfully in life, through death, and to our own glorious resurrection in the life of the world to come. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!