

PENTECOST XXIII Proper 25B 28 October 2018

A Homily preached by the Reverend Roger B. White, Rector of St Andrew's Parish, Kent, Connecticut

Jeremiah 31.7-1; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7.23-28; Mark 10.46-52

The story of the healing of Bartimaeus that we have just heard is the story of the last thing that happens in Mark's Gospel before Jesus enters Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. It invites us to contrast it with the stories that we have been hearing over the past few weeks about the other people who encounter, who surround Jesus as he nears Jerusalem where he will suffer his Passion and death.

The Scribes and the Pharisees –the leadership of the Temple cult—try, as is their wont, to trick him into agreeing that a man may divorce his wife or denying that Moses could righteously have permitted this, and he dodges the trap by telling them that their entire idea of what marriage is –a property transaction, giving husbands powers over their wives—is not what God in Creation intended marriage to be.

But the Temple leadership fears his rapidly growing popularity with crowds, and they are hostile to him. Others who have been listening to him clearly find him more compelling. And so, as we have heard, a rich young man approaches Jesus and asks how much more he must do in order to have eternal life, having scrupulously lived what Torah –The Law of Moses—commands. He walks away disappointed, crushed really, when Jesus response is that it requires more than simply following the rules, that it also includes a changing of the heart and a casting off of the claims that your lands, your fortune, your family, and your friends have over your decisions. It is about obedience to the expectations that God has for you

And his most intimate followers, those whom he seeks to be his friends –the Twelve, whom he has called to travel with him and to learn from him—simply cannot understand, cannot believe what he is saying They will not for whatever reasons accept that the Messiah (and they now understand that this is who he is) will not be spared real suffering; that greatness within the Kingdom that is coming is not about wealth or political power but rather about service; that Glory is in self-sacrifice, in giving of yourself to and for others. They refuse to see who the Messiah in fact is –not a prince of this world or a warrior with a mighty army--and they refuse to see what this means for them, for how they need to live in this world if the Messiah is what they have wanted, expected.

And then –now, today—they, we, meet Bartimaeus. He is blind, and yet he can see who the Messiah really is, knows what it might mean, and he clamors –less, as in the translation that we have heard that Jesus 'have mercy upon' him than that 'in your mercy, Jesus help me'. You can do this: so, please, help.

The people around him try to silence him –O, Bartimaeus again ... —but Jesus rebukes them as he has rebuked those seeking to keep children from approaching him: his Passion, his suffering, has begun and his fears as to what await him in Jerusalem are mounting. He begins simply to

pour out his gifts, his love, on those who recognize him for who and what he is. He tells Bartimaeus that his faith has made him well, and ... Bartimaeus ... follows him. What the rich young man could not do because of his attachment to his wealth, Bartimaeus does because suddenly he sees again and understands that beginning, just beginning to follow Jesus is leading him to ... wholeness.

Blind Bartimaeus is more willing to see who and what Jesus is and what Jesus can do than are the Twelve with their eyesight: the eyes of Faith see what more fearful eyes cannot. And so Bartimaeus follows, apparently into the Palm Sunday procession ...? As a witness to the Crucifixion ...? As a witness to the Resurrection ...? We do not know

At this moment in Mark's Gospel he appears in a far more favorable light than do the Twelve, the perpetually uncomprehending blockheads, as Mark portrays them. And yet we know that they did become witnesses to the Crucifixion, to the Resurrection, and to the post-Resurrection appearances. They also followed Jesus, however reluctantly and fearfully, into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, along with Bartimaeus. They, like Bartimaeus just began to follow

And Jesus is clear about what it is to follow him, and it may be that just beginning, moving forward timid step by wavering step allows the next step to be more clear, easier. The blind Bartimaeus, now seeing, follows and perhaps sees more and more, grows still more whole. And the Twelve, struggling each step of the way, we know become witnesses, 'martyrs', to what they have seen, believe. They become witnesses to the Resurrection, to new life, to the importance of service and self-sacrifice.

And perhaps what the Twelve and Bartimaeus have in common is that they encounter in Jesus someone who gives life to the words of the prophet that we have also just heard:

See, I am going to bring [my people] ... and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor [the outcasts and the fragile] together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them ..., I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble ...'.

And in their trust, in their willingness just to begin to follow –simply to begin—will be ... hope. Amen.