

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

When his eye sight was diminishing, the great 17th century poet John Milton dictated to aides his epic work *Paradise Lost*. He also wrote a sonnet on his blindness. At first Milton believed he might be judged unworthy if he did not produce something worthwhile for God, but then he had the insight that God would not exact from a person more than he enabled the person to do. Milton concluded his poem by writing, “They also serve who only stand and wait” – that is, waiting patiently for the Lord is also an act of faith deserving of salvation.

Today’s gospel recounts a similar tale of a blind man’s faith and the usefulness of his condition. The sightless Bartimaeus had the gifts ancients have long ascribed to the blind – insight, perceptiveness, and wisdom. (You might be familiar with Plato’s allegory of the cave.) As he sits begging, Bartimaeus wants sight more than alms. A few coins might see him through the day, but sight could liberate him from his miserable occupation. He feels hope rising when he hears that Jesus, the healer, is drawing near. In an act of faith, Bartimaeus calls out, “*Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me.*” He is rewarded with physical sight, but he also has an insight into the fullness of faith. Rather than going his own way, he decides to follow Jesus. It is known that Jesus is bound for martyrdom in Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is risking his own life by accompanying him.

There is a dismissive tone of voice from those around Jesus when Bartimaeus calls for attention: “*many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.*” As if to say, “The Master doesn’t have time for you. Clam up and keep your place.” Bartimaeus’ begging station was likely a spot he had been assigned to by the powers that be, or perhaps by public consensus, a conventional policy of the day for the disabled. In their eyes, that was where he belonged, a helpless young man who had to depend on charity. Jesus changed all that – despite the protests of those who thought Bartimaeus didn’t deserve the Lord’s attention, who thought there were far more deserving citizens around. Jesus responds to Bartimaeus’ vision.

How many “Bartimaeus’s” do we encounter on any given day in our ministry? They are the injured and the ailing; those living with a disability and others dealing with a disease; the prematurely born infant clinging to life and the weakened elderly drawing toward the end of life. They sit at the roadside like Bartimaeus calling for our attention, and although it may be “our job” to stop and visit them, to assess their condition, or to offer

them pastoral care, we may comfort ourselves in the back of our mind with knowledge, “After this, I am able to walk on.” They exist not simply for us to fulfill a corporal work of mercy but for *us* to be affected by their presence. We know well, the measurement of their worth is not on a scale of physical capacity. This is what Milton was on to when he recognized his own blindness as a service.

In the first reading from the prophet Jeremiah we find the Israelites in a celebratory mood. Why? Because they’ve been living in captivity in Babylon for generations – lost, away from home. They were victims not only of historical circumstances but also their sins. Their exile removed them from proximity to God, leaving them with feelings of abandonment and despair. Crippled in body and spirit, the prophet Jeremiah describes the healing God provides to his Chosen People: “*I will gather them from the ends of the world,*” the Lord says. “*They departed in tears, but I will console them and guide them.*” It is a mending of their brokenness, a restoration of hope.

But the return from exile in Babylon is not a mere event in history the scriptures record. It is a paradigm of the human condition the prophets want us to remember. How long did the children of Israel go aching for their homeland, carrying on with broken hearts? The Psalmist remembers it this way: “*By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars in its midst we hung up our harps.*” (137:1-2) In the book of Lamentations, the question is asked of God, “*Why have you utterly forgotten us, forsaken us for so long?*” (5:20) The state of their condition should be of service to understanding our own spiritual journey.

In contemplating this or any broken condition, we are challenged to recognize that God *does* see us and honors us when we are hurting. “*I have witnessed the affliction of my people... I have heard their cry*” (Exodus 3:7), so Yahweh said through Moses to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Now in today’s gospel, we see the Incarnate God doing the same. He *sees* and *listens* to Bartimaeus. His suffering is not for naught. This blind man was of service just by standing and waiting. His begging provides the occasion for Jesus to manifest God’s love and attention to be made known. The passage from the letter to the Hebrews makes this claim about Christ the priest-servant: “*He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness.*” We have a Savior who assimilates with the suffering, who can empathize with the wounded, who sees himself in his unnoticed brothers and sisters.

Bartimaeus desires more than alms; he longs to see and *be seen*. The Israelites find more than restoration to their homeland; they discover the purpose of their exile. Those who are physically or emotionally suffering certainly want relief, but they also want their dignity, their personhood to be honored. John Milton’s poetic insight – “They also serve who only stand and wait” – reminds us that our personal redemption can come from those we may at first see as deficient in some way.

Have you noticed this?

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