

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 22nd Sunday after Trinity
October 28, 2018

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Some of you remember the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* lectionary. Like the *Saint Joseph Missal*, it had a one-year cycle of lessons, and the Sunday texts were fully printed out. The story of “a certain blind man” was the gospel for Quinquagesima, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. St Luke’s Gospel didn’t name the man, but St Mark does. He is *Bartimaeus*.

On Quinquagesima, Lent was right around the corner. So in preaching we made much of the fact this incident was the first time where the term “Son of David” was used as a title for the Lord Jesus. The only possible meaning for “Son of David” was *Messiah*. The blind man desired to receive his sight, and only the Messiah could do that. This means the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth was now being declared openly. As a prophet, Jesus taught the word of God. But the Messiah not only teaches but *does something*, and the “doing” was about to happen. The great events which accomplish our salvation were about to unfold. So we used to preach just before the beginning of Lent.

In the present-day lectionary we have another interesting association. The encounter with blind Bartimaeus follows by a week the incident Jesus had with James and John. He had nicknamed them “sons of thunder” and they wanted special privileges. And what the two gospel incidents have in common is that in each case the Lord asks, “What do you want Me to do for you?” In each case Christ does not reject the request but probes the heart and sees the good in it.

Christian discipleship demands single-mindedness and persistence. That is true even when sometimes our hearts are at first set on *wrong* things. We can only wonder at the times we asked God for the very opposite of what He knows we really need! But the first important step is to want something badly enough to *ask Him for it*. James and John asked for political clout. At the bottom of the request the Lord saw they really wanted to remain close to Him. Remember that Almighty God does not see as man sees but looks on the heart.

Bartimaeus wanted his sight. That might seem obvious to us. But it was not perverse for Jesus to ask the question. “What do you want Me to do for you?”

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You'll have to *say* it, Bartimaeus." Blind men do not always want sight any more than sinners want to be cleansed or sick people want to be healed. There is power in the familiarity with what is known. Bartimaeus had a life. It may have been miserable by the standards of people who have their eyesight. But at least his life was predictable. The power of sickness may include our loss of will to be healed.

To answer Christ, however, with the plea, "Master, let me receive my sight" is to ask for *metanoia*, a change in the way we see things and the way we live. Bartimaeus was not asking a 1st century ophthalmologist to treat glaucoma! To ask Christ for eyesight is really to ask to see things from God's point of view. And that sight is far from comforting. As with James and John, the Lord was probing deeper here. "Will you use your eyesight to do something for God, Bartimaeus? Or will you let your eyes bring you to sin in a way not possible when you were blind?"

Christians are people learning to see as God sees. With the prospect of spending his life as a captive in an English prison, King Lear says to his daughter Cordelia, "Come, let's away to prison, and take upon's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies." (*Act 5, Scene 3*) The Christian sees through things, and *through people*, and finds God and His Glory. The Christian knows what the Mass declares is true. "Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

There are really only two alternatives for the person who refuses to live on the surface of life: he becomes a cynic, or a contemplative. The contemplative has a sense of direction, gets up out of the ditch, like Bartimaeus, and comes to Christ. From then on, with this focus in his life, he sets out on the road to do something in a world which refuses to see things as they really are. "To take upon's the mystery of things, As if we were God's spies."

So we are to learn from Bartimaeus. He ignored the wisdom of the crowd, pressed through it, came to Jesus, received his sight, and followed the Lord on the Way. When we begin to see things from God's point of view there is only one thing to do and that is to get up and follow Him. For Bartimaeus and for anybody else, that is the winning ticket!

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