

OCTOBER 28, 2012: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Jeremiah 31:7-9 Hebrews 5:1-6 Mark 10:46-52

Today Mark concludes his three ways of dying with Jesus with one of the meaningful narratives of his gospel: the cure of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

He began his teaching on how we're to die with Jesus back in chapter 8, stressing the death which comes from being totally open to whatever God wants of us. In chapter 9, he expanded that death to include our accepting everyone in the community as equals, even the most powerless. Finally, we heard Jesus' non-negotiable command to imitate his ministry by becoming servants and slaves to all.

Never dreaming anyone would ever separate the two passages, Mark created our Bartimaeus narrative as a contrast to last week's James and John passage. Only twice in his gospel does Jesus ask anyone, "What do you want me to do for you?:" here and last week. James and John stupidly ask for the glory seats; the blind beggar for something significantly different.

Bartimaeus has already shown himself as a potential perfect disciple by immediately responding to Jesus' call, even throwing aside his only possession: his cloak. So when Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" Mark's readers are leaning in like the thousands of people in those old E.F. Hutton commercials, waiting to learn what answer an ideal follower of Jesus will give.

"Master," the blind man replies, "I want to see."

Mark presumes that simple request should always be our prayer: just to see what the risen Jesus wants us to see on that specific day, in that specific place, with those specific people around us. How is he expecting us to die today in ways we hadn't noticed yesterday?

Notice also how Jesus responds: "Go your way; your faith has saved you," instead of, "Go your way; I cure you." Mark is convinced it is our faith in Jesus' dying and rising that opens our eyes to our own dying and rising.

Just one last point - the evangelist ends his narrative by mentioning, "Immediately he received his sight and went behind him on the way." Remember Mark began this whole question of dying and rising with Jesus in chapter 8 by having Jesus tell Peter, "Get behind me, Satan." Finally, we've found the perfect disciple, one who follows behind Jesus instead of being an obstacle in his path. If you turn the gospel, not lectionary page, you'll discover Mark's very next passage describes Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He only has six more days to live. Bartimaeus is following him to his death ... and resurrection.

Though Jeremiah was convinced that the only way 6th century BCE Judaism could be salvaged was by undergoing a complete destruction and rebirth in the Babylonian Exile, he was just as convinced that Yahweh would eventually bring the Chosen People back home to live their faith in a more meaningful, less ritualistic and legalistic way. "They departed in tears, but I will console them and guide them."

Many in our church today need to hear, be convinced and adopt this same hope. How do we change structures which the late Cardinal Martini recently referred to as being 200 years behind the time? It takes a lot of hope to believe that one day we'll return to the faith of Jesus.

Perhaps it's important to also zero in on the faith of the author of Hebrews. He believed the reason Jesus could save us was because he became completely one with us. "He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness." It's consoling to know the risen Jesus is suffering through these times with us. Though it doesn't take away the pain, somehow it makes it more bearable.

NOVEMBER 4, 2012: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 6:2-6 Hebrews 7:23-28 Mark 12:28b-34

Renowned christologist Fr. Pat Gaffney once mentioned a conversion he had with his deaf and mute mother shortly before she died. Something he said triggered a brow twisting question. "Are you saying Jesus was a Jew?" she signed. Pat immediately signed back, "Of course, mother, he was a Jew." His mother thought for a few seconds, broke out in a wide smile and signed, "Well, at least he converted before he died!"

Pat never told us what he said next, but all scholars agree, Jesus never did convert. He lived and died as a Jew. Today's gospel passage clearly demonstrates his commitment to that ancient faith.

As a Pharisee, Jesus was determined to follow all 613 Laws of Moses - not just the 10 Commandments. And just as we construct top 10 lists today, so his fellow Pharisees tried to surface the most important of those regulations. No doubt he frequently dealt with the question, "Which is the first of all the commandments?"

Like any good Jew, Jesus turns to the Hebrew Scriptures for an answer. Today every pious Jew integrates his quote from our Deuteronomy reading into his or her morning prayers. "Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone! Therefore, you shall love Yahweh your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Jewish faith always revolves around its dedication to Yahweh. The writer of the earliest source of Genesis - the 10th century BCE Yahwist - tells us in chapter 15 that "Abraham (the first Jew) put his faith in Yahweh, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness." Without total faith in Yahweh there is no Judaism.

Jesus immediately follows #1 with #2. Going back to the third Torah book, Leviticus 19:18, he reminds the scribe of one of the most quoted Mosaic laws: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In an oft-mentioned rabbinic story, when a Gentile asks the revered rabbi Gamaliel to summarize Judaism in the time it takes him to "stand on one foot," the rabbi simply gives the same quote Jesus provides the scribe. It's an essential element in Jewish faith and action.

Yet as much as Mark's narrative paints a picture of Jesus, the good Jew, it also goes one step further, telling us in what his reform of Judaism is rooted. "When Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to (the scribe), 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'"

Though the author of Hebrews theologically emphasizes Jesus' essential difference from Jewish priests who offer sacrifices for sins, it would appear the historical Jesus never conceived of his mission in those terms. As far as we can tell from the gospels, this Galilean carpenter-turned-itinerant-preacher went town to town, synagogue to synagogue simply proclaiming that God's working effectively right here and now in everyone's life: that God's kingdom is in our midst.

Of course, as Jesus said back in Mark 1, at the beginning of his public ministry, in order to be able to perceive that kingdom, one must go through a "repentance:" a total change in one's value system, a 180 degree turn in what one thinks important in his or her life. In this case, if the scribe really makes love and dedication to God and neighbor the focus of his life, he'll also discover God working in that life.

Our zeroing in on God and neighbor is a means to an end. For Jesus, that end isn't just getting into heaven; it's experiencing God's presence long before our physical deaths. Jesus is convinced that our life is too good and too important to waste on just preparing for eternity.

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