

Jeremiah 31:7-9  
Psalm 146: Praise God, my soul!  
Acts 9:1-19  
Mark 10:46-52

**Blind Visionaries:  
Blindness and Vision in Christian Life  
October 29, 2006 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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Approximately 580 years before Jesus, Jeremiah proclaimed a prophecy of hope to the people of Judah, who were in exile in Babylon. He spoke of the restoration of sight to the blind as an image of the actualization of God's redemption, in their case, the seemingly impossible return to their homeland.

In Psalm 146, a liturgical hymn of praise, probably sung in the Temple between the time of Jeremiah and Jesus, the restoration of sight to the blind is a sign of God's active presence in Israel's midst.

The story of Paul's conversion in Acts, told not long after Jesus' death, literalizes the imagery of Jeremiah and the metaphor of the psalmist. Saul is rendered physically blind when confronted by the risen Jesus while on a journey. He is healed of this blindness by a reluctant disciple, Ananias, who touches Saul and restores his sight. Saul, who saw faith in Jesus as the enemy of Judaism, becomes Paul who sees Jesus as the Christ. The metaphor for Paul's insight, his conversion, is the healing of his blindness.

So it's no surprise that the gospel writers, including the anonymous writer we call Mark, depict Jesus healing the blind. In Mark's story, Jesus heals a blind man who is a beggar, on the outskirts of Jericho, as Jesus departs to continue his journey toward Jerusalem. Key to Mark's story is the contrast between the disciples and the blind beggar, Bartimaeus.

From the beginning of the gospel, Mark portrays the disciples [a group that included the apostles and all those who embraced Jesus' teaching and followed him] as blind to Jesus' true identity, despite their closeness to Jesus. These disciples had the privilege of regular contact with Jesus. They witnessed him heal the sick, enable paralytics to walk, drive out unclean spirits, feed crowds with a few

loaves and fish, and raise a little girl from the dead. They had the benefit of his teaching both publicly and privately. They were taken into Jesus' personal confidence when he shared with them, on three separate occasions, that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. Despite this special access to Jesus, they misinterpret Jesus' identity and role. Even when they grasp that he might *be* Messiah, they misunderstand what that means. From the beginning of the gospel to the end, they are "blind" to who Jesus is.

When blind Bartimaeus appears, the contrast is vivid. He can't see Jesus coming. He can only hear that Jesus of Nazareth is about to pass by. But his words reveal the depth of his recognition: "Heir of David, have pity on me," he calls out loudly, repeatedly. With these few words, he conveys that he recognizes Jesus as Messiah *and* he recognizes the type of Messiah Jesus is: not a warrior-ruler, but a servant who brings healing to those society counts the least.

When Jesus encounters Bartimaeus, Jesus is with the disciples and a sizeable crowd. Mark tells us someone rebukes Bartimaeus and tells him to be silent. But despite the rebuke, Bartimaeus persists with his mantra: "Jesus, descendent of David, have pity on me".

Then Jesus stops. He says, "Call him" to me. And those who call him [the disciples?] change their tone and offer words of encouragement to Bartimaeus. Bartimaeus, for his part, throws aside his cloak, springs up and comes to Jesus. Jesus asks him, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus replies, "Rabbouni, I want to see."

This interaction between Bartimaeus and Jesus stands in stark contrast to the interaction of James and John with Jesus in the passage immediately preceding this story. Jesus had just told the disciples for the third time of his coming suffering and death in Jerusalem. Do you remember what James and John said? They said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask you. We want to sit at your right hand and your left when you come into your kingdom". After all their time with Jesus, they are still thinking power, prestige, status, control.

Jesus' response to Bartimaeus stands in contrast to his response to James and John. Jesus is unable to grant the request of James and John; but God can heal Bartimaeus through Jesus. Jesus tells Bartimaeus to go his way, his faith has saved him.

Bartimaeus – who immediately receives his sight – pursues the implications of his visionary perception. Instead of going *his way*, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on Jesus' way, the way to Jerusalem, the way of suffering service, the way of death if necessary. Bartimaeus not only was able to see in his blindness. He was a person of vision.

So what does this have to do with us? To the extent that we find ourselves in the story, we identify with Bartimaeus – even though we're not beggars and even though we're not blind! But Mark calls us, as Mark called the original audience, to identify with the disciples. After all, in our time, we are among those who embrace Jesus and claim to follow him. And so often, we *are* blind. Sometimes partially. Sometimes totally. Sometimes we can't see *the way* through. Despite our commitment to follow Jesus, we can be really blind to who Jesus is and to what Jesus calls us. And, like Bartimaeus, we need to ask – persistently - for God's mercy and for the healing of our blindness. Like Bartimaeus, we need to trust that our blindness can be healed. And like Paul, we need our companions in faith, we need one another, to reach out and touch us, to heal us and to help us to see.

The good news is that the greater miracle wasn't the healing of Bartimaeus. The greater miracle was the insight, understanding and vision the disciples received after the resurrection. The healing came to *them*. They finally began to see what Bartimaeus grasped in even in his blindness. And if it was possible even for those disciples, it's possible for us. If we understand our blindness, ask God for sight, and accept the healing touch of our companions in faith, we *can* see *the way*, Jesus' way, sometimes even clearly. At those times, we have, not just sight, but vision: vision *in* the moment and vision *for* the future. We actually grasp, in the here and now, the path of service, even when it entails our personal suffering. We perceive, imagine, envision the way in the future and a future in the way.

That's the good news. We're not only *called* to be seeing people, people of vision. We're not only *called* to walk the way. Blind visionaries though we be, we *can* be healed; we *can* see. When we are healed of our blindness, again and again, God is made manifest anew.