

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 30TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Jeremiah 31: 7-9 Psalm 126 Hebrews 5: 1-6 Mark 10: 46-52

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Bartimaeus' story ends the section of Mark that has focused on Jesus' teachings and passion predictions. There is irony in the story of this blind beggar: those who were supposed to have sight, the disciples, are blind ---while the blind person sees. Bartimaeus calls Jesus by the messianic title, "Son of David." No one else has used that title. In fact, Jesus has been discouraging people from identifying him as the long-awaited messiah whom they hoped would overthrow the Romans and fulfill popular and religious expectations.

But now Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem where he will reveal the true nature of his messiahship and Bartimaeus' clarion voice announces Jesus' arrival to the Holy City. The messiah has arrived, perhaps not what people expected, but plainly visible to those who have the eyes of faith. What is there about Bartimaeus that they tried to silence? (Were the disciples themselves the ones trying to hush the boisterous beggar?) Were they afraid the shouts and messianic titles Bartimaeus was using would alert the authorities in the city? Bartimaeus is a prelude to the welcome the crowds will give Jesus, in the next episode, as he enters Jerusalem. Bartimaeus is also a reminder of a familiar message in the gospels: the insignificant and outsiders are the ones to recognize Jesus. It is those on the side of the road who need Jesus most and it is to them that he responds with his total self—even if his actions precipitate his death. Jesus is living out his teachings to the disciples about self-sacrifice for the least.

Bartimaeus' life will be changed by his encounter with Jesus. Mark mentions that Bartimaeus, on hearing that Jesus was calling for him, "threw aside his cloak, sprang up and came to Jesus." Perhaps his cloak was the outer garment used by the poor as a night covering. Jewish law forbade taking it as payment for a debt because a poor person would need it to keep warm. Maybe it was a beggar's cloak spread out to collect alms. Bartimaeus had little, but what he had he left behind; just as the disciples did when Jesus first called them. Bartimaeus, who had nothing, had more than the rich man of two Sundays ago who lacked the faith to follow and trust in Jesus. Bartimaeus left more than his cloak behind, he left his former life and was ready to see the life Jesus would give him with his healing.

In true Marcan narrative, Bartimaeus "immediately receives his sight.

"Immediately" seems to be a favorite word for Mark. Some respond immediately to Jesus' invitation to follow him, while others are immediately healed. Of course, Jesus' response to the man is immediate; but so is Bartimaeus' response to Jesus, he "followed Jesus on the way." And we know "the way" is a gospel expression for Jesus' way—the implication is that Bartimaeus becomes a follower. This beggar has received everything from Jesus and now goes with him into Jerusalem as a follower.

We who have received sight need Jesus to lead the way and he does. He has shown us his way to God, and it passes through Jerusalem and the cross.

Mark invites us to identify with the seeming insignificant people in his gospel. (We will soon hear the story of another seeming minor character in the story of the widow's mite. 12: 41-44.) One would think we should be identifying with the disciples throughout the gospel narrative. But as the story goes on, the disciples seem to be keeping Jesus at arms' length. They find him too much for them. If we identified with them, we would have an excuse for a less than total response to Jesus. But not so the little ones in this gospel; they see in Jesus the one who can save them, make them "well" and they eagerly surrender themselves to him. So, in these "little ones" we witness a model for our own childlike response to Jesus and his way. "I assure you, whoever does not accept the reign of God like a little child shall not take part in it" (10:15).

How then shall we enter this story? We follow Mark's prompting and place ourselves in the blind man's shoes. There are several possibilities as we do this. For example, we celebrate at this eucharist the particular way we have of seeing; our faith opens our eyes to see reality through Jesus' eyes. So, we notice those unnoticed by the rest of the world; we stand with them and unite our voice with theirs. Or perhaps this eucharist finds us feeling like an outsider ourselves, standing by the roadside; not one of Jesus' intimates. We hear the Bartimaeus story and are assured that Jesus notices us and invites us to come closer. Or, maybe we have hung back, been less than enthusiastic disciples. Nevertheless, Jesus calls us away from the edge, more towards the center of the community, where he waits to give us sight to follow him more fully.

Bartimaeus may have been a roadside outsider at the beginning of this story; but Jesus invites him closer. The "outsider" has taught us about faith and helps us leave behind other ways for the new life Jesus gives. Of course, one detail for us to notice is Jesus' immediate response to the beggar's call. We are in Jesus' company, traveling on our way with him. Like Jesus we need to be attuned to the call of the beggar in our lives. We notice the great haste throughout Mark's gospel. Jesus is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem; his disciples are dragging their feet. Despite his haste, he has time to stop and listen to the needs of the beggar. The poor, whether they be within our own families or across the world, need to be paid attention to—we must give them a chance to speak their needs and we must listen to them. Distance and circumstances may keep us separate from them and out of hearing. But there are others who speak for the poor of the world. If we can't hear the poor directly, we can at least be attentive to those who speak for them: religious communities, helping agencies, international relief organizations, journals, newsletters, webpages, etc.

One preacher, Eric Bergland (Clinton, N.C.), notes the parade elements in today's Jeremiah and Mark readings. People love parades, he says, and illustrates this fascination with the attraction to the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. There they are all those handsome, athletic and healthy young bodies who march with such grace and jump with joy over their victories.

Then there's the parade Jeremiah is describing. Chapter 31 is part of Jeremiah's "the Book of Consolation" (Chapters 30-31). The prophet is speaking on God's behalf to the whole people. God is calling them to shout for joy and God even provides their line for them, "The Lord has delivered the people, the remnant of Israel." The people have been scattered by the Babylonian invasions (627-586 B.C.E.) from their land. God will bring them back. Look who is in the parade--the blind, lame, mothers and pregnant women, all those wearied by their labors and exile. They are exhausted, so God will lead them on smooth ground with water along the way. Why would God do this? Because God is our parent, no other reason is given. It is God's free choice because God loves the people God has created. Jesus enfleshed the reality of Jeremiah's promise by including in his "parade" the blind man Bartimaeus.

The preacher may choose to focus on this reading with its wonderful loving image of God. The reading is addressed to the people in exile and the parallel may be drawn to the ways we are in exile today. What takes us away from home? ...from

our center? ...from our surety...? Some exile experiences might be: sickness, loss of a loved one, location shifts, disappointments in our life projects, the limitations some feel with aging. Any experience that makes us feel we are in “strange territory,” or “away from home,” might be used here. God speaks to us in the place of exile and assures us that we are not forgotten. God will search us out and lead us back, all the while being considerate and very aware of our battered condition. (“I will console them and guide them, I will lead them to brooks of water on a level road, so that none shall stumble.”) The reading points to our Gospel today. A blind person is given sight and follows in Jesus’ “parade” on the way home.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Sharon Theresa Zayac, O.P. EARTH SPIRITUALITY; IN THE CATHOLIC AND DOMINICAN TRADITIONS. (Sor Juana Press: 2003) ISBN 0-9740243-0-9, paper, 102 pages.

This brief book is a primer in earth spirituality tracing its roots in the biblical and ancient Hebrew and Christian traditions. It is a prophetic call to reclaim our image of a God bound up with everything on this planet. While it addresses, in part, Dominicans, it does speak to all preachers.

QUOTABLE

Genesis tells us that we humans are made in God's image. To the ancient Hebrew...this meant that humans represent, re-present, God. Humans do what God would do: they do not act for themselves. They do not represent themselves; they represent God. Even the kings of ancient Israel did not act in their own right. They represented God, ruling in God's likeness. Whenever the king's rule became absolute law in Israel, there was prophetic condemnation!

To have dominion means that humanity acts as God's representative. We exercise dominion as God does.... And how does God act in Genesis? God acts as loving creator, providing for the needs of all, and finding everything to be very good.

----Zayac, pages 60-1.

JUSTICE NOTES

The following principles highlight major themes from Catholic social teaching documents of the last century. (Continued from last week)

Role of Government and Subsidiarity

The state has a positive moral function. It is an instrument to promote human dignity, protect human rights, and build the common good. All people have a right and a responsibility to participate in political institutions so that government can achieve its proper goals.

The principle of subsidiarity holds that the functions of government should be performed at the lowest level possible, as long as they can be performed adequately. When the needs in question cannot adequately be met at the lower level, then it is not only necessary, but imperative that higher levels of government intervene.

Economic Justice

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. All workers have a right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, and to safe working conditions. They also have a fundamental right to organize and join unions. People have a right to economic initiative and private property, but these rights have limits. No one is allowed to amass excessive wealth when others lack the basic necessities of life.

Catholic teaching opposes collectivist and statist economic approaches. But it also rejects the notion that a free market automatically produces justice. Distributive justice, for example, cannot be achieved by relying entirely on free market forces. Competition and free markets are useful elements of economic systems. However, markets must be kept within limits, because there are many needs and goods that cannot be satisfied by the market system. It is the task of the state and of all society to intervene and ensure that these needs are met.

Stewardship of God's Creation

The goods of the earth are gifts from God, and they are intended by God for the benefit of everyone. There is a "social mortgage" that guides our use of the world's goods, and we have a responsibility to care for these goods as stewards and trustees, not as mere consumers and users. How we treat the environment is a measure of our stewardship, a sign of our respect for the Creator

-----from the Office for Social Justice, Archdiocese of Minneapolis

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Kevin Dolphin #0591302 (On death row since 5/13/98)
- Timon Dolphin #0590940 (5/13/98)
- Gary Greene #0155512 (6/1/98)
- Donald Scanlon #0546715 (6/9/98)

----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

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