

Sunday October 28, 2018, The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 30B
Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalm 126; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10:46-52
St John-the-Evangelist, Hamilton. The Rev'd Canon Brian Ruttan PhD

Mark 10:46-52

10:46 They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 10:47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" 10:48 Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" 10:49 Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." 10:50 So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 10:51 Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." 10:52 Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Our rector, I think you will agree, is a kind and generous man and I appreciate that very much. But during this series of addresses based on the tenth chapter of St Mark's gospel, called "The Upside-Down Kingdom", I wonder if he has been letting us off too easily. Perhaps his approach has been a bit soft on us out of his customary kindness.

As I listened to the last three homilies, I had the thought: maybe Jesus is teaching something with harder edges. Is there not a stronger "either/or" here in chapter 10? So I'd like to take these few minutes to explore Mark 10 again to conclude this series.

Let's begin with verse 15: Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child *will never enter it*". Jesus is pointing to the qualities of a child that are treasured in his kingdom: openness, wonder, vulnerability, dependence, need, weakness, overflowing with feelings. The sophistication of adulthood strips us of all but a shadow of these qualities. Adulthood closes up our vulnerability and neediness and openness. Wonder and feelings are relegated to inadmissible sentimentality. Adults are tough and strong, rational and single-minded. We are independent and self-reliant. There is no way in the world that I will peel away my hard-won sophistication and be like a child again. You might as well ask me to be reborn!

Skipping to verse 25 where Jesus says: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God". This is very stark. Our task, like the camel's, is impossible. Not only can you not take it with you, but just having it prevents entry. Note

that this teaching has nothing to do with how you use your money, your stewardship of it. It doesn't matter if you use it for worthy causes or to surround yourself with luxuries, the very fact that you are rich is the problem. The disciples get this. They say, "then who can be saved?" (26b). The problem is compounded for us because even the poorest among us here at St John-the-Evangelist, Hamilton, is fabulously wealthy compared to 2/3rds of the rest of the earth's people.

Another problem with accumulating wealth is that it is the very means by which we insulate ourselves from the childlike vulnerability and need that Jesus tells us are among the very things that are valued most in the kingdom of God.

Now we come to the whole matter of power and social status. Verses 42-44 run as follows:

So Jesus called the disciples and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.

Those who are valued in the kingdom of God are not those we honour in our sophisticated social world: the powerful and influential and famous. Rather, in God's realm those who serve are most valued, those who put themselves at the disposal of others, those who go unnoticed, who have no influence, no power.

This is a fundamental problem. To eschew power may even be contrary to what we are. One of the great founders of Psychology, Alfred Adler, concluded that the drive for power is basic human nature. Knowledge is power; we dress to convey our power. We strive for power to be influential, to make our mark on the world, to impose our will on others; such a far cry from becoming a slave to all. The very opposite of the vulnerability and need of the child and the poverty and need of the poor.

The point is we spend our energy striving for things that are worthless as far as God's kingdom is concerned: in a nutshell seeking sophistication, wealth and power. When we are striving for these things we are not striving towards anything that is concerned with the kingdom of God. And, Jesus says, striving for wealth and power actually bars the door to the kingdom of God. His language is uncompromising.

Our eyes, our worldly physical sight, will always be blind to this fact. Entry into God's kingdom is beyond our vision. The truth is plain. It stares us in the face but we are blind to it. We continue blithely on our worldly path confident in our blindness, but stumbling into the abyss.

So we arrive at today's Gospel reading from Mark 10:46-52, the story of the healing of Bartimaeus' blindness at the Jericho gate. The key phrase is this: Jesus said to Bartimaeus, "Go, your faith has made you well." (52).

Bartimaeus is utterly vulnerable, filled with desperate need, calling out without the slightest sophistication, embarrassing everybody, a penniless beggar on the bottom of the social ladder. Bartimaeus is physically blind, he has no sight at all, but he sees more clearly than anyone through the eyes of faith crying out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (48b). In worldly terms, Bartimaeus' prospects are nil, hopeless. He will live and die at the gate of Jericho blind, vulnerable, poverty stricken and forgotten. But his faith heals him. He sees again. He is free to follow Jesus on the holy way of the kingdom of God. In fact, if you follow the argument of Mark Chapter 10, Bartimaeus is a highly honoured citizen of the kingdom of God.

The message is that faith, and only faith, heals us. It heals the blindness that has us stumbling in the wrong direction and sets our sight on God's kingdom and its core values: wonder, poverty, vulnerability, service, obedience, humility.

Where does this leave us? We are living in a society that values most what is worthless and yet, this is what we are part of and here we must live. It is a paradox in which our physical thriving depends on our successful participation in the social world but our spiritual flourishing depends on the opposite: striving to live out the values of the kingdom of God and, in everything we do, making God the focus.

There is no escaping this paradox, but the penetrating light of faith is our source of hope. And, as with Bartimaeus' vision, it is the key to our focus on glory. The heartening news is that seeing and receiving the glory of Christ's kingdom through faith is altogether sufficient. God, in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, has done the rest.

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