

WEEKLY REFLECTION
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Mark 10:46-52

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There is a span of material in Mark's gospel, reaching from 8:27 to 10:45, which is bound together by a loose thread and a common movement. The movement is from north to south, more particularly, from the northern borders of Galilee to the beginning of the steep ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem. It is the way to the cross. Three times threaded through the passage Jesus announces that as Son of Man he will suffer and be rejected (8:31; 9:31; 10:33). Three times the disciples fail to understand. They show themselves blind to his purpose and to his values. Mark has set on either side of this span of material two accounts of Jesus' healing of blind men (8:22-26 and 10:46-52). The intention is doubtless symbolic. The disciples are blind. That is a primary function of today's passage in Mark's gospel.

Matthew also uses the healing of blind Bartimaeus symbolically. In fact, for the purpose, he transforms the story into the healing of two blind men (just as he transforms the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac into the exorcism of two demoniacs in 8:28-34; compare Mark 5:1-20). He also uses the story twice: at the end of Jesus' public ministry (20:29-34), as in Mark, but also at the end of the sample of Jesus' deeds in chapters 8-9 (9:27-31). The doubling appears to reflect the weight in law of two witnesses. John, too, has developed an extraordinary play on blindness, and on light and darkness in John 9.

The overall effect of what Mark is doing here is to reinforce the message of that great span of material, to challenge contemporary disciples to see what Jesus (and God) is really about. In Mark's gospel it is time to reflect. But there is more: the blind man of Jericho hails Jesus as 'Son of David'. In the scene which follows, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, we find him again hailed as Davidic king (11:10). Only days later he will hang on a cross as "king of the Jews". So our episode is also looking forward to the completion of the journey

But what about Bartimaeus? He is twice named (10:46): 'son of Timaeus' and 'Bartimaeus' - which also means 'son (Aramaic: bar) of Timaeus, meaning something like: son of the precious or worthy one. Probably more symbolism! But what about the real person under all this symbolic development? What if I am visually impaired, partially or fully blind? I cannot be reduced to a symbolic prop. What must it be like with all these words about blindness and songs about recovering sight when you know you are blind and will never see? There are many ways of being ignored, treated as someone who does not matter, or made into a stereotype. Is it possible to truly belong as a person with a disability in a community?

Bartimaeus is typically sidelined - on the side of the road. On the other hand, it was also the only place to be for beggars, strategically located outside the city gate to appeal for help to passers-by. These were the nobodies of society. When he raised his voice (10:47), people were quick to remind him he was a nobody (10:48). With the persistence which can characterise the desperate, the man does not shy away from being a nuisance. Jesus responds, hears his request, heals him. 'Your faith has saved you' must mean in Mark: you believed I could do this; so I can do it and will. He went with Jesus on the journey - back to more symbolism.

A nobody in the world's eyes, a sidelined person, a blind beggar, becomes the hero of faith. This is typically Mark at his subversive best. Mark can do this because he knew such stories. Jesus did not sideline people. Jesus responded to what were seen as the 'hopeless cases' of his day. Did Mark or an earlier story-teller perhaps make up the name to emphasise the point?

Whether at the symbolic level or at a literal level, the story illustrates an approach to people which is central to Jesus' teaching. How do we retell the story without sidelining blind people today? That is easier said than done. If we play up the miraculous we heighten the pain where healing is not happening and may be impossible. Piety can easily race by in the euphoria of symbolism and then the only abiding message is: we are irrelevant - and you are irrelevant.

Despite the inevitable exaggerations it is likely that Jesus did perform healings. It is too difficult otherwise to explain the strength of the tradition. Its relevance is another question - very relevant for the fortunate ones healed, very significant as a symbol of recovery and renewal, notable as fulfilment of biblical images of hope. But where the focus falls on the achievements, the cry from the roadside must be heard: me, too! Why do you prattle on about all these wonders when you know well that I shall be like this for the rest of my life? How can you be so insensitive, unrealistic?

Honest caring which does not over-promise or load me with guilt at promises unfulfilled is what I want from the side of the road. I, too, am someone of worth. Of course, I want change where that can be done, but I don't want to be the stuff of your miracles and potential propaganda. I am not odd, stupid, a "case", a need - I'm a person, not a discounted person or a person to be discounted.

We need to listen to Bartimaeus. Thank God he spoke up. When we do listen, we will know the journey we are on.