

By Ken Woodley: Sermon for St. Anne's October 27, 2024

Why? Rather than go to the blind man, Jesus made the beggar Bartimaeus find him in a large crowd leaving Jericho. Why?

Wouldn't it have been far kinder for Jesus to go to the blind man?

Let's set the scene: In the time of Jesus, Jericho was a "gateway city." Anyone traveling to Jerusalem from the north or the east passed through Jericho. That's in addition to the city's bustling population. Herod the Great, in fact, built his winter palace there. So today's gospel lesson from Mark is overflowing with people.

But here's the fascinating thing: Bartimaeus had zero difficulty finding Jesus among the throng going in and out of Jericho.

"So throwing off his cloak," the Gospel tells us, "he sprang up and came to Jesus." Bartimaeus had no problem at all. And that is the crucial point.

Despite the crowded confusion, a man who cannot see was able to find one person in particular and stand face to face with Jesus.

He did not have to search by trial and error, bumping into people, falling down, getting back up and trying again and again.

Surrounded by the darkness of being blind, Bartimaeus was able to see the light of Christ.

It was as if his soul had a homing signal that led him unerringly to one man among everyone else in that crowded place.

Bartimaeus, though blind, could see Jesus, and the truth of Jesus, far more clearly than just about anyone else in this very crowded scene.

Especially those who sternly warned him to be quiet and stop bothering Jesus. If they thought that Jesus couldn't be bothered to heal someone, they just couldn't really see Jesus at all.

And perhaps that explains why Jesus instructs them to tell Bartimaeus to come to him. Jesus wanted them to witness and ponder a blind man finding him in a large crowd.

Maybe he wanted them to wonder what a blind beggar could see in Jesus that they themselves were blind to. Might Jesus have been addressing the widespread spiritual blindness he sensed all around him?

Jesus, of course, heals Bartimaeus, telling him, in his very meaningful way, that Bartimaeus's own faith has made him well. I believe Jesus intuitively knew that Bartimaeus would easily find him. The blind man's insistent call was a cry of deep faith. But the events leading up to that healing almost seem more important than the healing, itself.

We all suffer times of momentary inner or spiritual blindness.

The world outside our own Jerichos is crowded with things that can blind us to the light of Christ and the love of God and make our souls feel surrounded by darkness, unable to feel the presence of God or Christ, stumbling, struggling to regain our spiritual footing and then falling again..

When that happens, it's a good idea to follow the example of Bartimaeus and shout with our lips and with our soul for Jesus to come and heal our inner blindness.

And keep on shouting with stubborn persistence, no matter how much the crowded world tries to keep us silent, as those around Bartimaeus had attempted to silence him.

When we persist in crying out for Jesus, we will find Christ. Our soul will be opened to his light. And in that light we will understand that Jesus never went anywhere.

He never left us behind, outside the walls of our own Jerichos. In our inner blindness, we couldn't see that he was right there with us all the time, and in a very special way that we might have lost sight of.

Like Bartimaeus, we mustn't forget to throw off our "cloaks." His beggar's cloak had become a cocoon of imprisonment, the "skin" of Bartimaeus's previously blind existence.

Throwing it off, as he sprang up and came to Jesus, he became like a new butterfly pulling free of its chrysalis. Spreading the wings of his new life of full sight and employment and a new cloak.

We can also pull free from the cocoon of our inner blindness. Throwing off the mental cloak that the world has crowded into our mind. Throwing it off so that our soul can see what so much of the crowded world is blind to—the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

Jesus repeatedly describes it with such simple, beautiful power in the Gospel of John. God, Jesus tells us in the 14th chapter, will send us the Holy Spirit. The world cannot accept the Holy Spirit, Jesus explains, because the world neither sees it nor knows it. But we will know it, Jesus assures us, because it lives with us and will actually be inside us.

“I in them and you in me,” Jesus prays to God in the 17th chapter. “May they be perfectly one.” That is a Holy Trinity of love that deserves our full attention and we are right in the very middle of it. God loves us, Jesus tells us, just as much as God loves him.

That transcendent, transformational truth is what the cloak of the crowded world can make us forget, leaving our souls feeling blind and alone, stumbling in the dark, unable to find—not one person in a crowded place—but unable to find what God has actually put within us.

The deepest truth in today’s gospel lesson about Bartimaeus’ encounter with Jesus is that the most profound “sight” we possess has nothing at all to do with our eyes.

And exploring that truth is the journey, and adventure, of a lifetime.

