

## **Mark 10:32-52 - Lent 2**

### **The Blindness of the Disciples**

We come to the end of Part One of Mark's Gospel, which centres on Jesus as the Sower of the Word, active in ministry and "on the way" to Jerusalem. Part Two of Mark's Gospel will continue in Jerusalem. Today's two stories, although appearing to be isolated situations, build toward the climax in Jerusalem.

The prelude to this last section of Part One is the ongoing blindness and deafness of the disciples. "Do you have eyes and fail to see?" Jesus asks his disciples. They have been insiders to Jesus' ministry from Day One, but they still fail to see. They continue in their spiritual blindness.

The blindness of the disciples sets the stage for today's reading. Human eyes it appears, cannot see the meaning and destiny of the figure of Jesus in their midst. God will have to open blind eyes to enable humans to see what there is to be seen. The stories of the restoration of sight to two blind men form bookends for the pronouncements of Jesus' destiny.

The two healings of blindness bracket Jesus' three declarations of his impending death. First, in Bethsaida, Jesus opened the eyes of an unnamed blind man, and now in Jericho, before heading to Jerusalem, he again heals a blind man, who, this time, is given a name. In between these healing stories lie Jesus' three "passion/resurrection" predictions or declarations, which the disciples do not understand at all. Jesus talks about the cross and they automatically envision glory, their glory! Their eyes are not open to see – they are just as blind as the man in Bethsaida and Bartimaeus in Jericho.

Jesus' first announcement came following Peter's confession that Jesus is the promised Messiah. When Jesus announces his impending death, Peter doesn't get it and rebukes Jesus, who in turn rebukes Peter: "Get away from

me Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not God's." In other words, "you are blind to the ways of God".

Then, while travelling through Galilee, Jesus repeats his declaration that he will die in Jerusalem, a pronouncement that terrifies his disciples into silence ... until they begin arguing with each other about who is the greatest, because, again, they don't get it – they are not only blind, but seem to be deaf as well.

The disciples aren't too keen on such gloomy affairs as sacrifice and suffering. Jesus' words take time, a long time, to sink in. When they reach Capernaum, Jesus asks them what they were discussing. They had been arguing about who was the greatest. So Jesus tells them: "Anyone who wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone." He then picked up a little child, and told them that leadership and greatness are all about welcoming the vulnerable.

And once again, for the third time, here in Jericho, Jesus says that he is going to Jerusalem to die: "When we get to Jerusalem, the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, beat him with their whips, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again." It appears that Mark has taken these words almost directly from Isaiah. And, again, the disciples don't get it. Their Rabbi, Jesus, after all, has come – at least in their minds – to restore a right order, to reign in glory, and to bring them along for the ride. So, it's no surprise that James and John ask for special places of power at Jesus' side - one on the right and one on the left.

Often, we too fall into the same trap that the disciples do. In a time of crisis, when Jesus has just announced that he is going to his death, they react with

the intuitive move to self-protection. Not only do they ask for seats of glory, but they do it apart from their companions, as if they believe there won't be enough glory to go around and so they'd better get theirs first. Their seemingly simple request turns into an angry confrontation as the other ten discover what James and John are pressing for. No wonder they are angry – it appears that James and John are trying to edge them out.

And are we any different? When we feel we're under attack, or afraid, or anxious, isn't the temptation always to move toward self-preservation, give into our fears about scarcity, and see our companions as rivals rather than friends? And, of course, it never works. So what's the alternative? Jesus invites them not just to re-imagine, but actually to redefine their understanding of power, prestige, status, and leadership.

Jesus defines leadership as serving the needs of another, which means that glory comes not from individual accomplishment but from service: “You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be different. Whoever wants to be leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even I, Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others.”

The reign of God is a place where “first rate sinners” are welcomed into the arms of divine love and mercy, only to be turned into “last place winners”, whose job it is to serve and sacrifice. The great reversal that Jesus keeps trying to hammer into gnarly noggins of his dearest dozen followers definitely runs counter to the prevailing wisdom of the “Gentiles” of that era, as well as to the notions of success and reward our culture preaches today. Not much has changed in that respect!

Mark knows that Jesus' words, Jesus' whole life, run contrary to our natural

tendency to think about power, leadership, and all of life according to the terms of the world, and take time to sink in. James and John think greatness comes from status and power. And in response, Jesus points out that there is no escaping service. You can either willingly, even joyfully, serve others, or you can become a slave to your illusions that you can be free, and can secure your future through status and power, or as in today's culture, through wealth or youth or fame or possessions.

So, Jesus asks – whom will you serve – the voices of culture that say that you can be free – **must** be free – on your own and at any cost, or the voice of Jesus that calls you to find your freedom and, your true self, through service to neighbour? We are made to be in relationship and we discover our wholeness only as we join ourselves to the fortunes of those around us.

One of the most pernicious illusions of our culture is that we are free and autonomous beings who can live independent of all bonds of loyalty, devotion and service. Yet, so much time and energy is expended, is subjected to the idea that we don't have to serve anyone.

The story of blind Bartimaeus comes on the heels of the request that James and John made – to be seated at Jesus' right hand and left hand in glory. Jesus asked both James and John the **identical** question he asked Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" James and John were spiritually blind, and even when Jesus addressed their request, explained the meaning of greatness to them, they still **remained** spiritually blind. Bartimaeus was physically blind; but when Jesus responded to his request, Bartimaeus could see - both physically and spiritually.

This is only one or two out of thirty healing stories in which we are given the name of the person healed – Bartimaeus – the other is Lazarus. Bartimaeus is a linguistic hybrid that's half Aramaic and half Greek. "Bar" means

“son” - so Bartimaeus is the “son” of Timaeus. Bartimaeus is not only the Aramaic “Son”, but combined with the Greek “timaeus”, which means “honourable”, he is the “son of honour” or an honoured person.

“Timaeus” may sound familiar to some. Timaeus is the title of Plato’s most famous dialogue and the name of its narrator. In the **Timaeus** and elsewhere, Plato famously contrasts “seeing” the mere physical world while being “blind” to Eternal Truths. The Timaeus was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century AD, every educated man could be presumed to have read. So, it is possible that Mark is contrasting Greek philosophy with the Jewish Jesus for his Gentile audience. Throughout the Gospels, we find Greek philosophy woven into the stories.

Now as Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples, a great multitude was with him. Blind Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside as the triumphal procession to Jerusalem passed him by “... he began to shout and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’” No one could stop him from shouting out. Finally, Jesus heard the shouts, and asked that the blind man be summoned. Bartimaeus threw down his cloak and ran to Jesus. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked. “Teacher, I want to see”, he said. And Jesus said to him, “Go, your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and **followed Jesus down the road – on the way to Jerusalem.**

Because Jesus has not as yet appeared in Mark’s story as the Son of David, this pericope plays a pivotal role in conveying Mark’s sense of this title to the reader. To begin with, Mark affirms with the title that Jesus is indeed of the lineage of David. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark has no genealogy that links Jesus with the line of David ... it appears that it is exactly the Davidic descent of Jesus which is being attested to when Bartimaeus addresses “Jesus of Nazareth” as “Son of David”. This is especially significant because Mark was

the first Gospel writer and therefore the first to identify Jesus as the Son of David. The confession of Bartimaeus prepares us for a shift in emphasis in Mark's storytelling as we move into the second part of the Gospel, as we head to Jerusalem.

In this climactic story, Mark portrays Bartimaeus as a kind of model of the Christian life. The Bartimaeus story is truly a story of what happens when God in Jesus Christ opens blind eyes. This is what happens when Jesus' word falls on **Good Soil!** We see that the Christian life begins with persistent pleading. "Jesus, have mercy on me!" That is the prayer of **good-soil** people. We come to Jesus in our need and in confession. Jesus does not turn away Bartimaeus, Jesus does not turn away sinners, Jesus does not turn us away when we come to him pleading for mercy. "Go", Jesus says, "your faith has made you well." "Go, and your eyes will be opened. Go and you will see me for real." And so we follow Jesus **on the way**.

Bartimaeus, is the **first person** in Mark's telling of the story who follows Jesus right after Jesus acts on his behalf. With eyes wide open, he is ready to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. With eyes wide open, he is ready to take up the cross and follow the Crucified One. Bartimaeus sees! Jesus opens his eyes. He is a man of faith. Faith is clearly defined in this story as "coming to Jesus for mercy!" Therein lies our hope for opened eyes. If the disciples didn't grasp the nature of the Sower, then what assurance do we have that we will do any better than the disciples?

Our best posture is the posture of faith that pleads and receives. Good soil is **receptive** soil. Let the seed fall on us, Jesus. Open our eyes. With eyes opened, we will follow you on the way! As with virtually all the characters in the gospels, we never hear about Bartimaeus again. But, with Mark's description of how he followed Jesus those seventeen miles from Jericho to Jerusalem, picture the Son of Timaeus confessing the Son of David, walking

with him to the City of David. Bartimaeus invites us to the same journey of “following Jesus on the way”, and to the same confession, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.”

Like Bartimaeus, we come in prayer, blind and pleading. We pray that we might be receptive soil. We pray that Jesus may open our eyes. We pray for the strength to follow on the way to the cross. The assurance of our prayer is that Jesus came to open blind eyes. He opened the eyes of Bartimaeus. He will open our eyes as well. Go. Your faith has made you well!

**Amen.**

## PRAYERS FOR FEBRUARY 25

Faithful God of love, you blessed us with your servant Son so that we might know how to serve your people with justice and with mercy. We gather the needs of ourselves and others, and offer them to you in faith and love, seeking to be strengthened to meet them.

God, you call the church on earth to witness to the life we receive in Jesus. Help us to share your good news with the world.

All creation is holy. Lead us to restore the hills and valleys, lakes and rivers, forests and coastlands to the beauty you created.

Call those who are wise and powerful to use their gifts to do justice in a world longing for peace, especially leaders of Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Gaza, and all areas of conflict and violence.

Provide caring communities for all who are burdened by guilt, shame, addiction and illness. Comfort those who mourn, ease the suffering of all who are lonely or in pain. Heal the sick, and bring to your table all who hunger and thirst for your mercy.

Break down the prejudice, the selfishness and fear that separates us from one another. Help nations of the world to find a way to live together in peace with honour and dignity. Forgive the arrogance of the strong and the resentment of the weak..

Loving God, it is not your will that any should suffer. We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst, those who live in the midst of violence or poverty, especially all the migrants, all the asylum seekers, refugees, and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

We mourn for those “captive” in detention centres, in decades-old refugee camps; those with no homeland and those exiled. Cloak the forgotten; those left behind; the black, brown, poor while sitting in prison; those crushed at borders neither here nor there. Wake us up to the wanton neglect of our role, our covenant, as neighbours and as stewards fo the planet. We are thankful for the 2 million refugees from Ukraine now in Poland, and the 1 million taken in by Germany.



Bless the work of those who are bringing aid to the troubled parts of the world and show us how we must bridge the gap between wealth and poverty, plenty and hunger.

Guide all leaders of our churches: the BC Synod; Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors, priests, councils, musicians, and lay leaders. Today we uplift Christ the King Lutheran in Surrey and Rev. Nicolas Alexandre, and pastors, priests, and deacons serving in full communion congregations, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

On this Diaconal Sunday, we give thanks for all the Deacons in the BC synod; Deacon Marie Keeley, Vancouver. Deacon Connie Landstrom, Sechelt, Deacon Brigitte Mackenzie, Victoria, Deacon Keirra Maher, Nanaimo, Deacon Denise Pawliuk, Fort Nelson, Deacon Judy Whaley, Sandspit.

Int your loving hands, gracious God, we place ourselves and all our prayers, spoken and unspoken, trusting in your mercy through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray:

**Our Father ...**