

Thirtieth Sunday – October 25, 2015

Today's gospel is a beautiful and touching story, utterly pastoral in its picture of human need and the powerful healing compassion of Jesus. It reminds me of a striking image used by Pope Francis, who gave us this money quote in September of 2013: "I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol or elevated blood sugars. You have to heal his wounds, then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds; heal the wounds."

This stunning image works, doesn't it? Why? Wounded people abound, the battle seems endless; every member of the Christian community needs to step up, else the staff of the field hospital will be too small for a task that is much too great.

We can't do everything, of course. Even Jesus didn't heal every blind person in Israel. But we can do something, something more, something better. Today's gospel gives us some food for thought and for action. Here are a few action items on this gospel menu, for today and tomorrow.

First, it's easy to miss and/or to dismiss Bartimaeus even when he makes a din. Savor this story for a moment. A quiz was given to a new class of nursing students in the first year of their training. Most of the students did well on the quiz, until they came to the last question which they all left blank. The question was, "What is the name of the woman you see every morning who cleans the school?" The students thought the question was a joke until they found out that the professor was counting it against them. When they protested, the professor said, "In your careers, you will meet many people. All of them are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you can do is smile and say hello."

Secondly, it's important to know what to pray for. "Master, I want to see." Bartimaeus had a ready answer, one sufficiently open-ended to be a more-than-adequate response. He wants not simply vision but understanding. Jesus replied that his faith had brought him all he needed and told him to go his way. The last line of the story completes the tale: Bartimaeus followed him on the way. Jesus' way had become his way. What more could he ask for?

Thirdly, with Bartimaeus we are invited to contemplate and admit our own blind spots. With Bartimaeus we can also call out for help, repeating as often as necessary, "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy" that the liturgy itself puts on our lips every time we gather for Mass.

"Master, I want to see." Not a bad prayer, is it? Jesus led and Bartimaeus followed. The blind beggar was led beyond any horizon he could have imagined. It takes courage to leave our cloaks behind and to let go of our accustomed posts and postures. Bartimaeus saw, understood clearly, and followed the Light that could never be dimmed. So too can we, please God. So too can we.