



DIOCESE OF PATERSON

Diocesan Center
777 Valley Road
Clifton, New Jersey 07013

Office of
THE BISHOP

(973) 777-8818 Fax (973) 777-8976

LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2017

BARTIMAEUS AND THE WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP

To all the faithful, laity, religious and clergy:

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus.

(Ph 1:2)

[1] From Mumbai to Monaco and from Los Angeles to Le Havre, beggars ply their trade in every major metropolis. Sprawled in front of stores and restaurants or standing guard at busy train stations, the poor and the destitute compete with those playing the part to win some monetary gift from passers-by. In New York City, there are nearly 4,000 individuals begging for assistance. Comparable numbers roam the streets of London, Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. Today's tourist or pilgrim to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome cannot enter the safe embrace of Bernini's colonnade without being approached by some mendicant with plaintive moans.

[2] From the dawn of civilization, beggars have been a visible class in every society. Jesus' day was no exception. The New Testament mentions a man born blind who begged (cf. Jn 9:8); two blind beggars at Jericho (cf. Mt 20:29-34); and, a lame man who used to sit and beg near the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 3:10). The New Testament identifies only two beggars by name. In one of his parables, Jesus speaks about "a poor man named Lazarus...at gate [of the rich man]...longing to be fed with the crumbs falling from the rich man's table" (cf. Lk 16:19-31). And, at the end of his gospel, Mark tells us of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar at the city gates of Jericho (cf. Mk 10:46-52).

[3] Mark's vivid narrative of the healing of Bartimaeus is full of details. The healing is precisely located not only at Jericho, but at the precise moment when Jesus and his disciples are leaving the city to go to Jerusalem. The blind man is seated by the wayside. He is quick to seize the opportunity of Jesus' passing by. Crying out for help, he refuses to be silenced by the crowd. Without a moment's hesitation, he casts off his garment and comes to Jesus to be healed. And, once given sight, he eagerly follows Jesus. All these particularizing details give us the confidence that we are reading an actual eyewitness account.

[4] No doubt there were many beggars at the gates of Jericho. With its flourishing oasis, it was a favorite resort for the rulers and rich of Jesus' day. Herod the Great built his winter palace here. The road that ran through Jericho was a strategic crossroads. Merchants, soldiers and pilgrims passed through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem. The city bustled with activity. The entrance to the city was the perfect place for beggars to station themselves.

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[5] On his way to Jerusalem for the last week of his life, Jesus passes through Jericho. Followed by an enthusiastic crowd as he exits the city, he is greeted by an army of beggars. Mark focuses our attention on Bartimaeus, the blind man who calls out, “Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me!” Only here and in the raising of Jairus’ daughter does Mark give us someone’s name when relating a miracle. In naming Bartimaeus, Mark gives us another detail not to be overlooked. He gives us the name of the blind man’s father.

[6] Commenting on the fact that Mark gives the man’s name and his father’s name as well, St. Augustine concludes that “Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, had fallen from some position of great prosperity and was now regarded as an object of the most notorious and the most remarkable wretchedness, because, in addition to being blind, he had also to sit begging...”(On the Consensus of the Evangelists, 2, 65, 125). Naming both the blind man and his father indicates that Bartimaeus was a well-known Christian within the church in Jerusalem. Mark wishes to use the narrative of his healing as teaching for all disciples.

[7] Mark is doing for us what Shakespeare does for his audience. As Hamlet says, both the playwright and the evangelist hold “the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (*Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2, 17-24). For “the Bard of Avon,” spectators watching his plays were to see themselves, their virtues and their vices. In the same way, Mark the evangelist narrates the healing of Bartimaeus in such a way so that we see ourselves as disciples whose eyes Jesus opens.

[8] Mark strategically places two healings of blind men in his gospel. Halfway through his gospel, he relates the first healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (cf. Mk 8:22-26). Immediately following Jesus’ reproof of the disciples for their spiritual blindness and their inability to see the hidden meaning of his words and deeds, Jesus restores sight to this blind man. But, he does so only gradually.

[9] At first, he puts spit on the man’s eyes. And, the man begins to see, but only dimly. He mistakes men for trees. Obviously, he had sight at one time, but lost it. Next, Jesus places his hands on the man’s eyes a second time and prays. The blind man’s sight is restored. He sees clearly. In this miracle alone, Jesus does not heal with his first touch. The man’s faith needs to be strengthened before Jesus heals him completely.

[10] For Mark, this healing dramatizes the gradual opening of the eyes of Jesus’ disciples to his true identity. As with this unnamed blind man, we are slow to believe in Jesus by letting him have complete lordship over our lives and all our senses. But, Jesus does not give up on us. Even if we have a minimal faith, he stays with us, working with us to bring us to wholeness.

[11] At the end of his gospel, Mark gives us a second healing of a blind man. The first healing takes place before Jesus and his disciples set out “on the way” (8:27). This second healing ends with the blind Bartimaeus, given sight, following Jesus “on the way” (10:52). Most assuredly, Mark wishes us to read the two miracles together. Like Jesus’ first disciples, we are to journey with the Lord “on the way,” moving from blindness to sight.

[12] As Jesus leaves Jericho, a surging crowd presses in on him. For the first time, Jesus does not curtail their enthusiasm. Jesus is intently undertaking the fifteen mile ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem for the last Passover of his life. In just a few days, he will undergo his passion, death and resurrection. He knows what lies ahead. But, the multitude does not. Hailing him as the long-awaited Messiah to free them from the yoke of Rome, they escort his every step with their shouts of praise. This is a dress rehearsal for Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday, the same multitude will cry out, “Hosanna to the Son of David.”

[13] As the crowd accompanying Jesus steps outside the city gates, the blind man hears the noise and the acclamations. Bartimaeus’ sight failed him, but not his hearing. He is blind, but not deaf. As soon as he learns that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he immediately begins to shout, “Son of David, have pity on me!” True desire cannot wait. Bartimaeus had heard of Jesus. He knows his own wretched condition and he

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believes that Jesus can save him. He does not let the moment pass. He is longing for healing and the Healer is there. Why delay? Only weak faith hesitates.

[14] The crowd quickly tries to silence this bothering beggar. But, he is not to be deterred. After all, he made his living by making noise and shouting out. Crowds are forever trying to silence the voice of those who would come to Jesus. In our day, the strident voices of secularism, materialism and hedonism seem more forceful than the voices of those who, like Bartimaeus, acknowledge Jesus as their Savior.

[15] Our secularized culture fosters the idea that faith is irrational and must be relegated to the private sphere. Those who criticize religion brand moral principles based on the natural law as religious bigotry. But, true faith cannot be squelched into silence. As believers, we are to raise our voices above the mob for the truth that Jesus offers as the Savior who heals our broken lives.

[16] Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus not just with his lips, but with his heart. This is true prayer. Words poured forth in petition are not of themselves true prayer. Rather, they must come from our hearts to reach the Lord who “searches the heart” (Jer 17:10). He is ready to give [our] heart’s desires (Ps 37:4). In fact, at times, the silent sigh of our heart can be the most effective prayer.

[17] Though the crowd rebukes him, Bartimaeus persists in his cry for help. No one can stop the blind man from coming face to face with Jesus. Only those who seek the Lord find the Lord (cf. Is 55:6). Hearing Bartimaeus’ shouts, Jesus halts his own death march to Calvary and calls for the blind man to be brought to him. The sincere plea of a poor beggar pierces the shallow Hosannas of the crowd.

[18] Above the acclaim of the many, the distress of the one catches Jesus’ attention. Not a single one of us is ever lost in a crowd. Jesus keeps his full gaze on each of us. Galileo once said that “the sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent on it, can still ripen [a single grape on] a cluster of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do.” So too God’s love surrounds each of us completely. Whatever our status or condition, the Lord is ever attentive to our particular needs; his ear, bent to hear our plea; his arm, ready to lift us up.

[19] Jesus’ command “Call him here!” converts the crowd keeping Bartimaeus from Jesus to the ones who bring the blind man to him. To us, the many who follow him today, the Lord issues the same mandate. He bids us bring others to him by our words, but most especially by our manner of life. “All people have a right to know Jesus Christ and his Gospel: and Christians, all Christians — priests, religious and lay faithful — have a corresponding duty to proclaim the Good News” (Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, October 28, 2012, Vatican Basilica).

[20] Called by Jesus, Bartimaeus leaps up from his seated position, decisively casting aside the cloak that he used to collect alms. Coming to Jesus is always a renouncing of a past way of life and an upward movement filled with joy. Already, even before Bartimaeus asks to be healed of blindness, his actions express his faith. In response to this faith, Jesus not only heals him of his blindness, but tells him that his faith has saved him. Jesus wishes to make our bodies sound and, more importantly, to bring us to salvation. Sickness and health are both his instruments to ready us for eternal life.

[21] Bartimaeus’ cure was immediate; and, his enthusiasm, exemplary. “Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.” He does not simply join the crowd on the journey to Jerusalem. Rather, Bartimaeus, once enlightened, becomes a true disciple who follows Jesus on the way that leads to the cross. This is the path of true discipleship. Our following Jesus always includes our sharing in his death and resurrection.

[22] In the Sacrament of Baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death and rise with him to new life. Baptism is the very beginning of our Christian life as disciples. “Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1213). In Baptism, our eyes are opened and we

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receive the light of faith. As St. Justin says, “This bath is called enlightenment, because those who receive [it] are enlightened in their understanding” (*Apology* 1, 61, 12).

[23] However, even for the baptized, willful ignorance, pride and sin cause spiritual blindness. “We can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there; instead, we see what we want to see” (Pope Francis, Homily October 24, 2015, Vatican Basilica). For this reason, once enlightened by the gift of faith, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as the one Savior. We need daily to put God’s will before our desires, his truth before our opinions and the joy of his presence before the unlawful pleasures of this world. Thus, by following Jesus, the Son of David, along the *via crucis*, by dying to self, we rise to new life and enter the New and Heavenly Jerusalem. Like Bartimaeus, following Jesus along the way, we are saved.

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on Ash Wednesday, the first day of March in the year of Our Lord,
two thousand and seventeen.*

+ Arthur J. Serratelli

Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli,
S.T.D., S.S.L., D.D.
Bishop of Paterson

Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, S.C.C.

Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, S.C.C.
Chancellor