



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
located at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone: 410-267-9333
Fax: 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

21 Pentecost - Year B

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Hebrews 7:23-28

Mark 10:46-52

The Rev. Canon Mary D. Glasspool

St. Anne's, Annapolis

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Believing is Seeing

Horatio Lord Nelson was a British naval commander of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, whose victories in the battles of the Nile and Trafalgar made him a British national hero. In a battle off Corsica in 1794, Nelson lost the sight in his right eye, and in July, 1797, while attacking a town in the Canary Islands, he sustained a wound in his right arm that resulted in the amputation of that arm. In 1801 Nelson became a vice admiral, but in spite of his rank he accepted service under Sir Hyde Parker when Sir Hyde was placed in command of the fleet sent to the Baltic Sea to compel Denmark and Sweden to discontinue their economic aid to France. In the Battle of Copenhagen, in which the British fleet destroyed the Danish in the harbor of the capital, Nelson, although second in command, took entire charge of British operations. At one point in the middle of the battle, a Lieutenant came to Nelson to call his attention to Parker's flag signal for the British ships to withdraw. Nelson placed a telescope to his blind eye and said: "I see no such signal!" And the British went on to stunning victory.

Today's Gospel Lesson is another story about seeing and not seeing. Jesus and his disciples come to Jericho; and as they are leaving Jericho, this blind beggar is sitting by the roadside, yelling out to Jesus for help. He needs to yell, what with a great multitude around. It was probably like the scene of a very large and noisy parade, with lots of spectators lining the route - all shouting and cheering and clapping. And old Bartimaeus sends up his cry for help from outside of the crowd - sitting there along the roadside. And what do the people do about him? They try to shut him up! What an embarrassment! His cries are an annoyance to their triumphant parade with Jesus. More than an annoyance - the cries of this blind beggar are an interruption. The parade must go on - so let's shut him up. Who among us can resist the feeling that Mark is offering a judgment upon the Church? Parading after Jesus with no notion of the cross ahead and the cost of discipleship, it very often refuses to be interrupted, nor is it willing to include the disqualified, a blind beggar, who is, after all, the only one really qualified to follow Jesus.

But Bartimaeus *persists* in his cries, despite the rebukes of those around him. And "Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here."" (v. 49a) Jesus stood still. He allowed himself to be interrupted - allowed a change in plans. He gave the whole of his attention, his heart and his mind, to a blind beggar. His stopping said clearly: "You are of immense value to me. You are important. You *matter!*" The assurance that one matters, one *counts*, is one of the deep and permanent needs of humanity. Do you and I meet that basic need in others? Do we stop and say, "You *matter* to me!?" Or are we too busy, too driven, too important with our own schedules to deal with interruptions? Stopping. Standing still. It is a necessary prelude to any real work of

healing. Jesus never healed anybody "on the run". Jesus stopped. Jesus stood still. He allowed himself to be interrupted. He gave his full attention to those in need.

Bartimaeus jumps up in response to Jesus' call- and comes to Jesus immediately. And Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" It may, at first, sound like a rather obtuse question for Jesus to ask of a blind man. Wouldn't you think that a blind man would want his sight? Yet an essential part of the healing process is that we *want* to be healed - and not everyone does! Any kind of healing or restoration to human wholeness will bring with it a *change* in our daily living - and usually some added responsibility or responsibilities. As Jesus asks Bartimaeus "What do you want me to do for you?" - So God asks *us* - even daily - "What do you want me to do for you?" I even hear a little echo sometimes: "Are you *sure* that's what you want?" How do we respond? Are we able to articulate what it is that we need from God for our own restoration to wholeness?

Bartimaeus knew. "My Teacher, let me see again." And Jesus said to him, "Go; your *faith* has made you well." And then, we read, "Immediately he regained his sight, and followed him on the way." (Verse 52) It's a little strange, isn't it? Jesus and his followers are on the road to Jerusalem, moving toward confrontation with the authorities and an ignominious death on the cross. And Jesus *releases* Bartimaeus from any obligation he might feel- "Go!" Jesus says to him. And yet, Bartimaeus *followed Jesus* "on the way". Bartimaeus models for us the stages of true discipleship. He began with *need*; went on to *gratitude*; and finished with *loyalty* - following Jesus to Jerusalem.

When we take a step back, so to speak, and look at the story and its location in Mark's Gospel, some even deeper insights begin to emerge. In the earlier healing stories, Jesus would more likely seek privacy away from the crowd - for himself and for the person in need. Earlier healings were sometimes performed with great difficulty - and were most likely followed by Jesus' charge that the one healed *not* talk about it afterward - not tell anyone. And in between the healings, Jesus attempts to instruct his disciples by giving them "inside information" about what is going to happen in Jerusalem - his passion and death. But the disciples repeatedly show themselves to be deaf to what Jesus is saying. Although Peter, at one point, manages to confess Jesus as "the Christ" - the next minute, we find Peter rebuking Jesus for saying that he will suffer and die - and Jesus has to say to Peter - "Get behind me Satan!" The disciples argue over who among them is the greatest; James and John ask for reserved seating in the Kingdom of God; and Jesus, through it all, keeps on trying to tell them there's painful, deathly stuff ahead!

The story of Blind Bartimaeus marks the end, in Mark's Gospel, of Jesus instructing the Twelve. This time, the healing of Blind Bartimaeus is without difficulty, without privacy, and without a charge to secrecy. In fact, the blind man who now sees, becomes a disciple. And the Twelve, insiders all the way and privy to Jesus' painful disclosures about his approaching passion - heard it all and heard nothing. They saw it all and saw nothing. The blind see; and the seeing are blind.

The miracle story, on the surface, is a simple narrative. A blind beggar named Bartimaeus cries out to attract Jesus' attention. Jesus asks him what he wants. Bartimaeus responds that he wants to see again. After Jesus' affirmative reply, the man is able to see immediately. And Jesus credits the marvelous happening to *faith*: "Go; your *faith* has made you well." And one of the things the Gospel writer Mark is trying to tell us, is that the miracle stories of his Gospel are the testimony of *faith*. They are told, not so much to *create* faith, as to *testify in faith* - and often, in retrospect, to the mysterious power of God in this Jesus about whom they are told. They do not offer any easy explanations or neat answers. Instead, and especially in the way Mark employs

them, they purposely leave us shaking our heads and asking: "Who then, is this?" A good and righteous man? A prophet of God? A heroic and compassionate carpenter? A wise rabbi? A visionary dreamer? Or is this One in whom the power and purpose, the presence and person of God, Godself takes hold of us in awesome judgment and redeeming mercy, in steadfast love, amazing grace, tender healing, and restoration to wholeness? Literally understood, the old saying "seeing is believing" is reversed in the healing of Blind Bartimaeus. In this event, just the opposite is true: *believing is seeing!* The story of Blind Bartimaeus speaks to us about *intentional* seeing and what that has to do with belief - *not* "Seeing is Believing" - but rather "Believing is Seeing."

What more accurate comment could there be about genuine faith? Faith is that power within human beings that allows us to see meaning in the incomprehensible situation; to be sure there is divine direction in the most difficult trial. People of faith can see the divine hand in situations even when they do not fully understand. Faith gives a sight and a vision that go far beyond the physical power to see. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7) says the Apostle Paul to his beloved Corinthians. "Give light to my eyes ..." (Psalm 13:3) the Psalmist cries in today's psalm. "My Teacher, let me see again." says Blind Bartimaeus. *Believing is seeing.*

I want to close by sharing with you a scene from Willa Cather's book, Death Comes for the Archbishop, in which the Bishop and his companion, Joseph, are discussing miracles. Joseph begins by saying:

"Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean; but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love."
Father Vaillant began pacing restlessly up and down as he spoke, and the Bishop watched him, musing. It was just this in his friend that was dear to him. "Where there is great love there are always miracles," he said at length. "One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears hear what is there about us always."

Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, Vintage Books edition: April, 1971, p. 50.

Amen.

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