

***Kyrie Eleison* (“Lord, Have Mercy”)**

(From the Quinquagesima Gospel St. Luke xviii.31.)

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 123-124

31 Then [Jesus] took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. 32 For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: 33 And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again. 34 And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken. 35 And it came to pass, that as he was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way side begging: 36 And hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. 37 And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. 38 And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me. 39 And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. 40 And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him, 41 Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. 42 And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee. 43 And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.

In rereading today’s Gospel text, I find myself intrigued by the person of the *certain blind man*, who *sat by the way side begging*. In the parallel account in the Book of Mark, we are even given his name: *Bartimaeus*. My interest in him is manifold. He occupies the very lowest station of life, for he is a beggar. But he is a man of very great faith in the Son of God, for he refuses to allow even Christ’s attendants to dissuade him from crying out for a miraculous healing. Lastly, he crosses every boundary of politically correct propriety according to the standards of the immensely powerful Jewish leaders whose representatives must surely have been on hand. For he calls Jesus by His messianic title *Thou Son of David*. This is a wonderful story, indeed.

Let’s first consider his station in life. It is not unreasonable to say that all of polite society does its very best to hold things together in such a way as to never allow the almost unspeakable fate of being plunged into homelessness and dependency upon others. The possibility that such a thing could even happen in our land and in our day is forced upon our consciousness when we see the urban shelters devoted to those whom life and circumstance have deprived of those things we too often take for granted. What does it take to get there? Not much. A divorce. A diagnosis of mental illness. Financial misfortune. Who might be the next one obligated to hold up a cardboard sign at the entrance to the shopping mall? Granted, there are always fakes and phonies, but there are also those whom life has simply wrecked. Like Job, they are left scraping their sores with a piece of clay pot, *sitting in the midst of the ashes* (Job 2:8).

The *blind man* was in this place. He had no other options. It was either starvation, or begging. And it is just here that a very important lesson presents itself to us. In a very complex world, there is tremendous relief when circumstances have vastly reduced the number of vari-

ables that will come into play for the most important decisions we face. Often, as long as we have even a shred of wiggle room, we will put off the inevitable. But crisis breeds dependency, and the nature of our dilemma may well be way past the scope of human ability to solve. I have met them every week in the hospital, room after room, during these last few months of chaplaincy training, many of them attached to every conceivable medical apparatus available. Rarely do they refuse to pray.

If we could but project Bartimaeus into the 21st century in our culture, we might imagine how his issues would have been addressed. There would have been no room nor need for *Jesus of Nazareth*. His case would simply have fallen under the aegis of the social service system. The stigma of his blindness would have been erased, and his physical needs met. And although these issues would have been addressed, he would still be blind, and he would have no reason to glorify God for a miracle.

But listen to him cry out! He can be heard even over the din of Jesus' well-wishers. What a colossal embarrassment he represents to those who are foolishly engaged in running a publicity machine for Christ: *And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace*. Not only is he an interruption, but he troubles our otherwise unclouded consciences: there he is, for all to see, at the wayside of the first century equivalent of Main Street, where such displays should be forbidden. But he has no other hope. How remarkably fortunate he is, in a respect that escapes the rest of us who count ourselves lucky by comparison! For soon he will meet the Son of God Himself, be healed, and will spend the rest of his born days glorifying God.

His blindness has also rendered him incapable of viewing all the results of his commotion. Not only is he annoying the disciples, but he is inviting the retaliation of the Jewish leaders, who follow Christ as starving coyotes might trail after a healthy prey, looking for even the slightest moment of vulnerability and weakness, so they can close in: *Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on ... Thou Son of David, have mercy on me*. Imagine their thoughts: "Where did this ignorant fellow come up with that great messianic title to append to this Jesus fellow?" Nothing more offensive could have fallen upon their ears. Even His followers would have marveled at this amazing insight from a poor, lowly beggar. What a scandal was being caused!

We who confess ourselves Anglicans should be very familiar with the language of begging: *And we most humbly beseech thee, O merciful Father, to hear us...* (Book of Common Prayer, p. 81, *The Invocation*); *We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table...* (*Prayer of Humble Access*, p. 82); *Kyrie eleison* says the Greek: "Lord have mercy". Human pride perceives this as horrible groveling, something one might be compelled to do only at gunpoint. But this is Kingdom language. It is the only kind, when sincerely uttered, that can get the Lord's attention through the competing racket of casual and half-hearted petitions. A mis-

erable, unfortunate human being in the very lowest and perhaps among the oldest of human occupations stops the Lord of Creation in His tracks: *And Jesus stood.*

What is it that may delay answers to our own prayers? How did Bartimaeus, of all people, get pushed to the front of the line, while the rest of us presentable folk seem to be compelled to wait our turn? Jesus likes to do business. Make no mistake about it: *...He commanded him to be brought unto him: and when he was come near, he asked him, saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?* The beggar has no competing interests for his time or energy. The answer he seeks is not a luxury he wishes to add to an already full life. It is not within the realm of, “Well, it would be nice if I could have it, but I can get along just as well without it.” None of the ambivalence that marks so much of our comfortable lives is found here. To quote those famous song lyrics from several decades back: “When you ain’t got nothin’, ya got nothin’ to lose.”

Learning from this Gospel encounter means acquiring an attitude that must endure for a lifetime, if we are to know the blessings of intimacy with God and answered prayer. It is one of persistent, intentional humility before Him, of forcing ourselves into a posture that is entirely unnatural to our dispositions, and certainly foreign to anything within the culture that surrounds us. When, within our hearts, we deliberately place ourselves with Bartimaeus on the wayside of life, and make sure we remain there, we will, in the hour of need, be assured that the Lord will heed our cry for His aid. Perhaps it would be fair to call this attitude an acknowledgement that we are always—even in our best and most untroubled periods of life—in desperate want of His help. *What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?* “Lord, I need help to get through this day.” Or perhaps, “I cannot glorify You in the dull ordinariness of my every day life without Your ready and constant assistance.” Or maybe, “There is so much against me right now, so many problematic circumstances, I can’t even begin to see my way through them.”

While tens of thousands of others saw the Lord Jesus only from afar, and would never testify to a personal encounter with Him, not so Bartimaeus the beggar: *Receive thy sight : thy faith hath saved thee . And immediately he received his sight , and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.* And so it is today. We hedge our bets for safety and security by every conceivable means, other than faith in God. Society labors 24/7 to forestall the awful day of dependency.

But the Scriptures proclaim that *at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philip. 2:10,11).

Bartimaeus would have had no problem with that. And neither should we.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.