

ON THE WAY

Psalm 34:1-8
Mark 10:46-52, NT p. 47

October 25, 2009
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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I will begin the Gospel reading from Mark chapter 10, at verse 32. This is a major turning point in the story of Jesus in this gospel. At the beginning, he was baptized by John. He has called disciples. He has taught them and the crowds. He has fed the people, healed those in need, and demonstrated the rule of God, which is not at all like the rule of the emperor. The disciples and the crowds are still following him, though it's clear that the disciples don't understand the full implications of who Jesus is and what he is doing. So far in this gospel, Jesus has not gone to Jerusalem, but now he is on the way there.

Mark 10:32-34 The third Passion prediction.

People are "amazed and afraid," yet they continue to follow Jesus. He tells his disciples privately, for the third time, what faces him in Jerusalem, with more detail than before. This time there is no recorded reaction. Instead, James and John have a question.

Mark 10:35-40 The request of James and John

Not long before, Jesus had told them to become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God. I don't think he had this kind of childish question in mind.... The "cup" is the cup of suffering. The "baptism" is a baptism of death and resurrection. Even the little bit of water we use in baptism is meant to symbolize death. Baptism by immersion demonstrates death and resurrection much more clearly. James and John say they're ready.... The positions at the right and left of Jesus will be occupied by others, when he is lifted up on the cross, and they are not positions of honor.

Mark 10:41-45 The life of service

The other ten disciples were angry with James and John – because of their arrogant question, or because the others hadn't thought to ask first? Jesus once more has to try to get it through their heads and into their hearts – the kingdom is not about power, but about service.

Mark 10:41-52 The healing and call of Bartimaeus

They came to Jericho. The city of Jericho was built around a large fresh-water spring. It is one of the oldest continually-occupied locations in that part of the world. Archeologists have discovered buildings there that are 9000 years old. It is just west of the Jordan River, in what is now called the West Bank. At 1200 feet below sea level, it is about 3500 feet below Jerusalem, which is built on a high ridge, so from Jericho to Jerusalem was definitely up....

Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, and gives him a new title, "Son of David." This is a politically dangerous title, but one that had been associated with the promise of a coming Messiah. Of course, that doesn't mean that Bartimaeus knew everything about Jesus, or that he understood more than others, but it is another piece of the identity of Jesus....

The crowd tries to keep him quiet. I wonder why. Maybe Jesus seemed to be very focused on making good time up to Jerusalem, and the disciples didn't want him delayed. Maybe he was teaching as he went along, and the others couldn't hear over the loud cries of the blind man. Maybe he often made a ruckus, and they were tired of him. They sternly ordered him to be quiet, just as the disciples had spoken sternly to the mothers bringing their children to Jesus. In both cases, Jesus welcomed these insignificant little ones.... The blind man is very persistent, and his call is heard and answered by Jesus.... So then the crowd, following the example of Jesus, encourages Bartimaeus to "Take heart. He's calling you"....

The cloak he throws off could be a beggar's cloak that went across his lap to collect the small coins that might come his way. It could also symbolize letting go of the old life, as

those early Christians did when they were baptized....

Jesus asks him the same question he had asked James and John. The blind man has a ready answer.... Jesus' next word to the blind man is "Go." No spit and mud on his eyes. No prayer. When his sight was restored, no warning to keep quiet. The crowd had already tried that. "Go; your faith has made you well." Bartimaeus has demonstrated his faith by calling out for mercy. His names for Jesus – Son of David, and teacher or master – revealed his understanding of who Jesus is. But in one way he does not obey the word of Jesus. He does not go. He follows Jesus on the way.

What does it mean to be "on the way" with Jesus? First, it means to have some sense of where he is going – into a troubled world intensely concerned with power struggles at the top and miserable poverty for the vast majority of the population. Jesus faces confrontation and death, because these systems cannot tolerate the love and justice of the Son of God, Son of David. The disciples and the crowd had good reason to be amazed and afraid.

Second, to be on the way with Jesus means to listen – to the cries of the needy, to words of mercy, to the correcting example of this Teacher and Healer. The people in the crowd learn quickly from Jesus how to encourage Bartimaeus. "Take heart," they say. "He is calling *you*."

Third, to be on the way means to receive new life when we cry out in faith. Bartimaeus would never be rich because he followed Jesus. He might even have less money than the few coins he got by begging. But he would have the richness of life with Jesus and the company of the friends of Jesus in the future.

Fourth, to be on the way means to get up and go, wherever Jesus leads. I think Mark implies that Bartimaeus was so thankful to receive his sight that he couldn't imagine doing

anything else, except to follow Jesus on the way. What a contrast with the rich man, who couldn't let go of all that he had in order to follow Jesus, and went away sad. Bartimaeus joyfully followed Jesus.

A good story invites us all into the action. Where are you in this story? Maybe you are like Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside, without any insight into what is next in your life. Blind, but hopeful, you listen for good news.

Maybe you are part of the crowd, amazed and afraid, but still wanting to be near this amazing Teacher. His life fascinates you. His teachings ring true. You know you're not perfect, and neither is anyone else in the crowd, but somehow you know that you're closer to God when you're on the way with Jesus.

Maybe you are like one of the twelve, strongly committed to this journey of faith. You might realize that all your time with Jesus still hasn't quite prepared you for the unexpected. You know you're clueless at times. But you can't imagine life anywhere else except on the way with Jesus.

We are on the way together – to confront the ways of injustice and oppression, to listen to the cries of the needy, to call out in faith for help for ourselves when we lack vision and strength. We are on the way with Jesus. He is always ahead of us, yet always with us. Wherever he leads us in the coming week, in the coming year, may we be ready to follow in faith and joy.

Let us pray. Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through challenges unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

