**October 24, 2021** “Once and for All”

Psalm 34: 1-22, Hebrews 7: 23-28, Mark 10: 46-52

Can an encounter with Jesus transform us?

Well, it depends on whether or not we recognize Him for Who He Is.

Two weeks back, in our journey with Jesus through the Gospel of Mark, we were introduced to the rich man (whose name we do not know) who went away grieving when Jesus told him he must give all of his possessions to the poor in order to follow Him and receive eternal life.

As we read this Scripture together, I suggested that the rich man is an example for all of us, whether or not we are rich, whether or not we are men, because each of us has *something* preventing us from fully following Jesus.

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Well this morning, in the text we have just heard about the blind beggar Bartimaeus and the healing He receives from Jesus, we may have just met the “exception that proves the rule.”

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar.

Bartimaeus, who *unlike* the rich man and many other figures in the Gospel, *is named.*

This man Bartimaeus has *nothing* holding him back from following Jesus, *nothing* holding him back from calling out to Jesus, seeking His healing, and becoming one of Jesus’ disciples.

Whereas the rich man had too much to lose in order to follow Jesus, Bartimaeus has almost nothing to lose (almost, as we shall see).

According to the story, in-fact, Bartimaeus is *so free* to follow Jesus, that his faithful calls of “Son of David, have mercy on me!” actually *annoy* the people around him so much that they try to quiet him down.

Between the two figures we have met, the rich man in Mark 10: 17-31 and Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in this week’s verses, there appears at first to be a clear and simple instruction:

-Do not be like the rich man who will not part with his possessions, rather

-Be like Bartimaeus who gives it all up to follow Jesus

Simple: do this, don’t do that.

And yet, while this instruction is correct

While it is certainly better to be as faithful, hopeful, and obedient to God as Bartimaeus was (and the rich man was not), there is much more to this story than this simple lesson.

The problem we will encounter if we do not dig deeper into Bartimaeus and Jesus is that “the Gospel is not a morality lesson.”

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When I was a student minister, interning at Central Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, my minister (Rev. Jim Smith) taught me never to simply moralize.

And interestingly, he taught me this in the context of the children’s lesson:

When giving the children’s lesson (or “Children’s Time” as we say here at St. Andrew’s), the goal is to present the Gospel in a way that children can engage with. We can do this through stories, through questions, through personal sharing, and through examples that take their lived experience into consideration. But again, the goal is to present the Gospel, to present the person of Jesus Christ. But there’s something important to keep in mind: the Gospel is *not* a morality lesson.

The Gospel (the story of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ) is not interested in teaching us simply how to be “good people.”

If it is, then **we** who are convicted by the Holy Spirit of our own sin and the sin of the world; our need for healing, as well as the Good News that this healing has come in the person of Jesus the Christ, **we have a problem.**

One simply cannot confess their sins before Christ, ask for help and healing, and then say in the same breath: “but I’m a good person.”

An encounter with Jesus does not make us “good people,” rather it makes us **sinners aware of our salvation**.

There *are* plenty of ways we can learn to be better people; there are plenty of places we can go to hear why it is better to be honest than to lie, why it is better to share than to be selfish, and why it is better to practice peace than violence; there are plenty of places *in Scripture* to learn these lessons, but I would like to challenge us today by saying “the Gospel is not one of these places…”

In the examples I have given, the comparison between our two stories and characters, the **rich man** and **Bartimaeus**, we have proof that “learning to be good” is not the purpose of the Gospel story:

The rich man already knew “how to be good,” he had (in his own words) observed every Old Testament commandment to the letter since his youth.

What he did not know, and what he was not willing to accept, is that God is not simply the judge or referee of the world (rewarding good behaviour and punishing bad); the lesson that the rich man did not accept that Bartimaeus knew immediately is that God is far beyond the judge or referee of the world; God (in Jesus Christ) is the Messiah, and as we will see, even more than that.

And this fact, the fact of “Who Jesus Is” as Messiah and more, is far more important than any lesson in morality, especially in Mark’s Gospel.

If you read Mark’s Gospel from front to back, and it is not a long read, you can do it about an hour, (if you’re looking to get started in reading the Bible, I can’t recommend enough just sitting down with Mark, and you can call and ask me any questions you have), you will see that Mark actually structures his whole story around the question of “Who Jesus Is.”

Matthew, Luke, and John (the other Gospels) each have slightly different approaches to their Gospel stories, but for Mark, it is all about revealing “Who Jesus Is.” And yet, throughout this story, very few people actually *recognize* Jesus for who He is, and of those who *do* they all share something in common with our friend Bartimaeus (I’ll just leave that to encourage you to read it).

For Bartimaeus, and for all who recognize Jesus throughout Mark, nothing is more important than this fact of “Who Jesus Is.”

More important than any personal improvement, more important than any test of faith, more important than any virtue is the bare fact of “Who Jesus Is.”

As we return to the story of Bartimaeus from Mark, I invite you to keep in mind that while it is true to say that Bartimaeus behaves better than the rich man, while it is true that Bartimaeus practices good faith, none of this matters, none of it even makes sense **if not for the fact of Who Jesus Is.**

As the story of Bartimaeus begins, Jesus, along and his disciples, are about to leave the city of Jericho when something stops him:

A voice from the midst of the crowd: “Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me!”

Now, the source of this voice, this man must not have been the most popular man in Jericho because Mark tells us directly: “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet”

And can we just take a minute to appreciate how cruel that was?

Knowing what we know; knowing that the voice crying out in the crowd belongs to a blind, penniless beggar, how cruel is it that this man who has *nothing* is told to “keep quiet” when he has the courage to ask Jesus for help.

Well, good for Bartimaeus, he doesn’t listen to the people telling him to keep quiet and he calls out again: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And finally, this time, Jesus hears the man and he asks for him to come forward.

After receiving Jesus’ invitation to come forward, Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, never to see it again, and he goes to Jesus as quickly as he can.

When Bartimaeus reaches Jesus, Jesus asks him “What do you want me to do for you?”

And if we have any doubt as to Bartimaeus’ perfect understanding of who Jesus is, here is our proof:

What does Bartimaeus do?

Does he justify himself to Jesus? No.

Giving an account of his righteousness? No.

Does he appeal to Jesus in any way? Seeking pity for the favour he is about to ask? No.

What does Bartimaeus do?

He replies as simply as he can “My teacher, let me see again.”

Jesus I know you are the Son of David, the Messiah, I know you have come to free us from all that binds us, let me see again.

In other instances of Jesus healing the sight of the blind, Jesus takes mud and saliva, or just saliva and he applies it to the person’s eyes to make them able to see.

Not so with Bartimaeus. With Bartimaeus, Jesus only replies with the same simplicity he was asked “Go; your faith has made you well.”

The final word in the story is this: Immediately [Bartimaeus] regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.

Leaving what little he had, Bartimaeus took his newly-healed sight, and he followed Jesus out of Jericho, not because of what Bartimaeus himself did, but because of **who Jesus Is**.

Friends, when we meet Bartimaeus this morning, he is the least in his entire community:

Penniless, blind, despised, Bartimaeus has more reason than anyone around him to be angry with God, to want nothing to do with this travelling healer who some say is the Messiah, and yet he proves to be the most faithful person in all of Jericho.

Bartimaeus is so faithful, in fact, that even before Jesus is within earshot, he is already proclaiming him as the Messiah, the Son of David.

And despite the angry words and the cruelty of his neighbours, Bartimaeus continues to proclaim him: “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

As he leaves Jericho, now a disciple, it must have been an incredible shock to those in the crowd, those who had argued with him to be quiet.

“Where is he going? And why didn’t he come back for his cloak?”

In reading this story of Bartimaeus, in reading about the one whose recognition of who Jesus was counted more than any wealth or righteousness, I always wonder about the person who ended up holding Bartimaeus’ cloak, watching this poor, blind, beggar, now given site, now walking behind Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

Like many people in the Gospels, this person is not *named*, and actually they are not even *mentioned* in this story, but *someone* must have ended up with the cloak that Bartimaeus cast away so easily.

Why would a man with so little leave what little he has to follow Jesus?

Friends, if the purpose of the Gospel were—in fact—to teach us to be good, then the answer to this question would be something like “faithfulness.”

Bartimaeus’ superior “faithfulness,” his superior “trust” or “obedience” must have made him capable of doing what no other person in Jericho could do that day.

That is the simple lesson we started with: be like Bartimaeus, not like the rich man.

Yet, as I have suggested, that is not the point.

Even though Bartimaeus’ faith made him well, none of this could have taken place at all without Jesus being Who He Is.

Son of David come back

Messiah come to defeat Israel’s enemies

And (greater even than Bartimaeus could comprehend at the time) God in human flesh come to take away the sins of the world.

Friends, to the question we began with this morning: “Can an encounter with Jesus transform us?”

The answer is: “Yes, inasmuch as we are able to recognize and proclaim Who He Is.”

When the rich man approached Jesus, he saw a teacher with the keys to eternal life.

When Bartimaeus approached Jesus, he recognized the Son of David, the Messiah, come to save his people.

However, having access to the Scriptures and the testimony of all the Saints, we have access to **even greater recognition!**

Jesus of Nazareth is not just a teacher, not just the Old Testament Messiah, but He is the Christ, the word made flesh, the one by whose crucifixion, death, and resurrection we have been saved, a fact of reality, that not even Bartimaeus yet knew.

We know this, it has been revealed to us.

God has and will continue to give us all we need to be believe it.

But will we?

Will we?

As that person from Jericho stood there, with Bartimaeus’ cloak in their hand, watching Jesus and the disciples walk toward Jerusalem, what must they have been thinking to themselves?

Having seen the poorest, the most pitied and despised person in town, throw off his cloak, be healed of his blindness, and follow Jesus on the Way, how could this person make sense of what they had just experienced?

“If this Jesus of Nazareth can really heal the blind, maybe He is who they say?”

What if he is the Son of David? What if He is the Messiah?

What if He is even more than this?

Friends, the Good News this morning is Jesus of Nazareth *is* even more than the Son of David, the Messiah.

Jesus of Nazareth is not just a healer and a hope-giver, but He is nothing less than God in human flesh, the Christ, come to take away the sins of the world.

This Jesus has come, not just to call the good and the godly, but to walk with sinners, to bind up the broken-hearted, to liberate the captives, and to help the blind to see.

Jesus Christ did not come to call the fortunate; not the wealthy, nor the healthy, nor the whole.

Rather Jesus Christ came to call those who would recognize who he is.

Those who would have the courage to let go of their own goodness, their own righteousness, their own reasons to be saved, and simply proclaim the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in simple words: “Son of David, let me see…”

These things have taken place, these things have been revealed to us, these things have been done in order to save us, all because of who God became in order to save us.

Jesus Christ, God made flesh.

Amen.