

30th Sunday of Year

When I was a student in Rome, I used to see a beggar by the bus stop each day. He appeared to have lost the lower part of a leg. One day I passed earlier than usual, and saw him leap off the bus, spread his blanket on the pavement, and then lie down, folding his leg under him! Cloaks were part of the equipment of beggars, just as blankets and cardboard boxes are today for those on the streets. They served as a place to throw their offerings, as well as to keep the beggar warm. St Mark is a great one for the small details, and the cloak has its special significance in the way he tells the story.

The story of Bar-Timaeus is not just that of an individual who is healed of his blindness. St Mark's Gospel is not just a collection of short stories. This healing comes right at the end of the second section of the Gospel, immediately before Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final Act of his earthly ministry. The first part of the Gospel raised the question, "Who is Jesus?" It concluded with Peter's statement of faith, "You are the Christ." The way for this was prepared by another healing of a blind man. This first healing was very different. Jesus made an ointment of mud and spittle, which he placed on the man's eyes. The healing took place in stages. At first, he could see only in a misty way. Jesus laid hands on him again, and he could see clearly. It was a living parable of how the disciples were slowly coming to see the truth about Jesus.

For the last seven Sundays, we have been hearing the second Act of the drama of salvation. "Where is Jesus going?" He travels towards Jerusalem for the final Act of the drama. In this section of the Gospel, there are no miracles. Instead, St Mark presents Jesus teaching his disciples. This whole section is sandwiched between the two stories of the healing of a blind man. Nowhere else does Mark tell us the name of the person Jesus has healed. Even here, it is not his personal name. He is the son of Timaeus. He is the blind beggar. Then, as now, so often those who are disabled are in some way depersonalised, referred to by their disability, or by their family relationship. However, disabled though he might be, he has a grasp of who Jesus is. He calls him by his Messianic title, "Son of David, have pity on me."

Up to now, Jesus has told people to keep quiet about who he is. This time he does not. He accepts the title, and simply asks what he can do. James and John had buttonholed Jesus and asked him for a self-centred favour, to sit at his right and left in the Kingdom. Bar-Timaeus asks nothing until Jesus invites him to make a request. This healing is instantaneous. There is no laying-on of hands. Our Lord simply says, "Go, your faith has saved you." Bar-Timaeus is the model disciple, who comes to vision spiritually as well as physically. He is a model for those who will come to faith after the resurrection. He has not seen Jesus, only heard about him from others. He puts his faith into words and action by getting up, leaving his cloak, pushing through the crowd, and crying out, "Son of David, have pity on me!" This faith is rewarded by sight, both inner, and outward, that enables him to see Jesus and follow him down the road. He leaves behind his old way of life, symbolised by the cloak, just as the new disciples will leave behind their old clothes and put on the new white robe of baptism.

Bar-Timaeus now has hope – he can see the way ahead literally and perhaps also spiritually – at least the next step. He is no longer held back by the trauma or sickness that deprived him of his sight. All of us go through experiences that can hold us back – perhaps bereavement, a quarrel, illness, injustice suffered. The pain and the after effects turn us inwards. We cannot see a way ahead. Jesus invites us to turn to him – to cry out in our pain. He invites us to bring to him those who are suffering. We must leave in the Lord's hands how he will bring about the healing they need, but we can be confident that through his healing touch they will be able to move forward in their lives.