

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B**  
**(Oct. 29, 2006)**

**Blind Spots**

Sometimes when we read a passage like the one you just heard out of its context we get only a limited appreciation of what the evangelist is trying to tell us. For instance if we put this passage back into its context in Mark's Gospel we find that it comes at the end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Mark began that journey with the story of a blind man who has his sight restored. Now he closes that journey with a similar story about another blind man, Bartimaeus. Along the way Jesus has been giving evidence of who he is, the Messiah, but people don't always understand that and even the disciples, as we saw last week, have trouble not so much perhaps with his being the Messiah but with what that means. After all he has already told them three times that he must suffer and die and then rise on the third day, but they just don't seem to get it.

Now Mark tells us that when this blind man, Bartimaeus, becomes aware that Jesus is passing by he cries out, "Son of David, have pity on me." "Son of David" is a messianic title. So the blind man recognizes Jesus as Messiah, but not only that, he also recognizes what kind of Messiah Jesus is. He remembers his scripture: how Isaiah said that in the Messianic times the eyes of the blind would be opened and he remembers the passage that Jesus applies to himself in the Nazareth synagogue, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, to open the eyes of the blind." This blind man *sees* what the disciples cannot see in spite of all the time they have spent with Jesus. He knows that Jesus is not the triumphalistic Messiah who will drive out the Roman occupiers of their nation. He is instead the friend of the poor and the needy.

This is perhaps why the Church has coupled this reading from Mark with what we heard from Jeremiah in the first reading. In that passage Jeremiah is describing the return of the exiles from Babylon. He tells us that as the Lord brings them back to their homeland those singled out for special recognition are not the ones we might expect: the rich and the

powerful, the “beautiful people,” the stars of Hollywood or the famous athletes. No, the ones he mentions are the blind and the lame, the mothers and those with child. Oh, the others are there as well since Jeremiah’s vision is universal. God is gathering them all, but the only ones singled out for special recognition are the ones who are always the object of God’s special care.

Now there are many lessons that could be learned from these readings. The first and most obvious has to do with blindness. Blindness in the Bible is often used as a metaphor for a lack of faith. There are, of course, many ways in which such blindness may be manifested. We heard one in last week’s Gospel: the wrong kind of ambition manifested by the two disciples who asked for positions of honor and prestige in the Kingdom of God. We heard another the previous week when the rich young man could not do what Jesus asked him to do: give up his wealth and follow him.

In the stories of the temptation of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the devil tries to deflect Jesus from his mission by offering him material goods, positions of prestige, and overweening pride. In his Spiritual Exercises St. Ignatius tells us that the way the evil one works in our lives is through a similar progression: riches to honor to pride. They are all sources of blindness.

We all have blind spots. It’s not for me to suggest what yours are. We are not all wealthy like the young man we heard about two weeks ago and we are not all ambitioning positions of prestige, like James and John in last week’s Gospel but there is something in all our lives that is preventing us from responding fully to the call of Jesus.

In the Gospel story, it’s the blind beggar’s persistence that wins him a hearing with Jesus. Maybe there’s a lesson there for us as well. Persevere. Don’t give up. After all everyone was against the blind man, including the disciples. But Jesus was not. And when Bartimaeus heard that Jesus was calling him, he threw aside his cloak, jumped up and ran to him. He threw aside what was encumbering him, what might have held him back so that he could come more easily before the Lord. I don’t have to spell that one out, do I?

When he cures him, Jesus says, “Go your way, your faith has healed

you.” Your faith, not me, but your faith. Go your way, Jesus tells him and Mark says, “Immediately he receives his sight and follows him up the road.” As a result of this encounter he chooses to follow Jesus. His way from now on will be the way of Jesus.

Bartimaeus is one of the little people we frequently encounter in the Gospel. They have their fifteen minutes of fame and then they disappear. More often than not we don't even know their names like the paralytic let down through the roof or the widow of Naim and her son or the shepherds at Bethlehem or the woman taken in adultery. You can think of many more, I'm sure. They are the “remnant” that Jeremiah talks about, the seemingly unimportant people, unimportant as this world tends to think, but immensely important in God's eyes. We still have the remnant with us. It seems to me that one of the challenges being put to us today is to be particularly mindful of that remnant because it's what God wants us to do. Like Bartimaeus we encounter Jesus in our celebration, both in Word and in Eucharist. Our encounter should strengthen and encourage us to do what Bartimaeus did: to follow the way of Jesus.