

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(Jeremiah 31:7-9 / Mark 10:46-52)  
25.10.2015

*There are none as blind as those who will not see.*  
How true that is!

Last week we listened to the gospel passage in which we heard James and John formulating their request for the first and best places in the kingdom. We also heard Jesus' rebuff of their request. Convinced they could see clearly, these two men, who were among Jesus' closest collaborators, were blind to their own arrogant pride.

What they eyed were the best places for themselves. They ignored the rest. They were so self-obsessed that they were blind to the needs of those around them.

Certainly, James and John had not recognised or taken into account all that they saw displayed in Jesus' life, for, if they had, they would have perceived that for Jesus the only place that really matters (and which should even be sought out) is that of the servant.

Jesus Himself chose the last place. He would have His disciples follow His example.

For Jesus, there was, there is, there should be, no jostling for the first place. Disciples should not be seeking out for themselves the best places in the house.

Jesus insists on the aspect of service in discipleship above and before all else.

No one should wish to *lord it over others*, but rather every disciple should be ready to kneel before others as their servant.

Let us be clear. In the true Christian optic there is no room for careerism among the community of disciples.

Pope Francis has echoed Jesus' teaching strongly in this regard.

I think of certain pronouncements he has made since he became Bishop of Rome.

One thinks of his famous *Fifteen illnesses of the Church* speech to the Roman Curia, or again many declarations he has made when receiving groups of Bishops (the successors of the apostles in the Church today), or again to the corps of Apostolic Nuncios (those who have for mission to identify candidates for the episcopal ministry), as well as many of the clergy gatherings he has addressed. I also think of words Pope Francis spoke to those training for ministry in the Church and their educators and formators.

There is little doubt that Pope Francis has railed fearlessly against that tendency of *lording it over others* which is to be found in some Church circles. He is having none of it! He sees such attitudes as standing in contradiction with the true and humble Christian witness which should be being offered by the whole Church and *a fortiori* her ministers.

We will have grasped by now, surely, that Pope Francis (like Jesus) certainly does not want what Jesus called in the gospels *blind leaders* to be guiding the people.

In his address to the Synod Fathers just yesterday, Pope Francis warned once again against the danger of *blinkered viewpoints*.

Like Jesus, the Holy Father clearly puts all of us on our guard against the danger of being blinded with pride. He warns us of the dangers of holding pride-filled attitudes in our hearts. Such attitudes blind people.

In his address to the Synod Fathers yesterday Pope Francis dared to unmask the existence of such attitudes in the hearts of those who should be dispensers of God's mercy at the heart of the Church. I quote his words:

*(The Synod) was about trying to view and interpret realities, today's realities, through God's eyes, so as to kindle the flame of faith and enlighten people's hearts in times marked by discouragement, social, economic and moral crisis, and growing pessimism.*

*It was about bearing witness to everyone that, for the Church, the Gospel continues to be a vital source of eternal newness, against all those who would indoctrinate it in dead stones to be hurled at others.*

*It was also about laying bare the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the Church's teachings or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families.*

In many ways what Pope Francis says echoes the Wisdom writer's insight: *pride precedes* (and often prepares) *a fall*.

I imagine it is this consideration, among others, that leads him to say: be careful around pride!

I repeat the phrase with which I opened: *There are none as blind as those who do not will to see.*

I would add: *There are none as blind who think they can see.*

There is always a risk for us to think that we can see more clearly than we can.

I think of Christ's statement about the dangers incurred by those who think they can see clearly enough to remove specks of dust or splinters of wood from other people's eyes, while they themselves are hindered from seeing properly because there are large planks in their eyes which impede their vision.

These people who judge others harshly are warned of the harsh judgement they thus prepare for themselves. They are told to *beware*.

To *beware* means to *be aware*. That implies, first and foremost, that we be more self-aware. Often those who judge others most harshly are totally blind to their own faults and failings, transgressions and sins.

Bearing all this in mind, we now turn to read the Bartimaeus story.

It seems to me that Mark chose where he wanted to place the Bartimaeus story.

I believe that Mark chose to place it just after the scene where James and John looked for central places in the kingdom, because he wanted to contrast the attitudes of James and John (who thought they could see) and Bartimaeus (who clearly knew and frankly acknowledged that he was a blind man).

The Bartimaeus story – even if it refers to a real event that was remembered from the story of Jesus' life and recorded by Mark – serves as a kind of parable in this respect.

The gospel story we read this morning makes points apart from and over and above, even while woven into, the healing account we are given here.

A central point of the Bartimaeus story is that this blind man was endowed with good insight, He had an interior vision. Bartimaeus saw more of and penetrated deeper into the mystery of God's love revealed by Jesus than the disciples who were already walking with Christ and the crowd which had gathered around Him in Jericho.

These people who saw themselves as close to Jesus actually wanted to exclude Bartimaeus.

When Bartimaeus cried out his distress, they told him to be quiet and go away with his ill untended to.

Do some people in the Church today not take the stance of Jesus' followers in the Gospel story?

Pope Francis addressed this issue yesterday when he said that we have for mission to make it clear that the Church is for all and not just for the perfect.

I quote: *It is about making it clear that the Church is a Church of the poor in spirit and of sinners seeking forgiveness, not simply of the righteous and the holy, but rather those who are righteous and holy precisely when they feel themselves poor sinners.*

He went on: *It is about trying to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian Newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible.*

I think there are some very interesting details in the story that are worth drawing attention to which help us understand how we should be situated as Church.

Jesus was on His way *out of Jericho*.

The Master Himself was on the outskirts of the town. Jesus was on the margins, as it were. (He still is. He always will be.)

He was *leaving Jericho for Jerusalem*.

Remember, that in Jerusalem we will see how Jesus was led *outside the city walls* to be crucified.

Jesus, in life and in death, was a man who was on the outer boundaries, far beyond the frontiers of security and respectability.

It was in this marginal place (going out of Jericho) that Jesus encountered Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus was also a man of the margins. He too was an outsider.

It is still those who are on the margins, outsiders, with whom Jesus relates best.

This blind man was someone excluded – at least to begin with. This is further drawn attention to in the story, for even the followers of Jesus want to keep him at a distance.

The blind man's encounter with Jesus, resulted from Christ's own command: *call him here*.

Bartimaeus was drawn in from the cold, beckoned to as he stood on the margins, invited to become part of the community of disciples.

We are told that Bartimaeus – once he was healed – engaged himself to follow Jesus.

This blind man became a true disciple.

He recognised himself to be a wounded man who had been healed and was called by Christ to walk the way to Jerusalem with Him.

The whole point Mark is making here is that Jesus comes to save those who live in darkness.

He calls these people. He leads them into the light.

He bids those on the margins to draw near to Him. He welcomes into the community of the disciples all those who, like Bartimaeus, stand in need of His healing grace.

In welcoming Bartimaeus Jesus offered warm hospitality to one whom those who were already disciples were ready to hold outside their number, in a place apart.

Jesus' willingness to welcome someone like Bartimaeus into the fold – a person whom many would have considered a sinner – so that this man could live close to Him, and walk with Him in the community of the disciples, cannot but call us into question when it comes to some of our attitudes in regard to those who might be considered outsiders today and even excluded from the communion of the Church.

I find it significant that the road Bartimaeus followed Jesus upon is the road that led to Jerusalem.

We have already seen one significance to this, but another thing that is hinted at here is the paschal mystery. The way to Jerusalem was the paschal itinerary.

The paschal way is the way we are all called to follow as members of the People of God, in a

pilgrim Church.

Do we not recognise here in these little notes to today's gospel passage certain motifs and concerns of the ministry of Francis Bishop of Rome?

I see today's gospel passage flagging up for us the importance of **mission** to those on the **margins**: an attention to these, which should be displayed, above all else, in and through the **mercy** dispensed to them. Mission, margins, mercy. These are key words of Pope Francis' teaching.

We should note that Bartimaeus' first plea was a plea for mercy: *Son of David, have pity of me.* Mercy implored and received preceded the healing Bartimaeus longed for and needed.

In the story we see how Jesus called upon Bartimaeus to have courage. We also see the good effect Jesus' words of recognition, spoken directly to Bartimaeus had upon him. Jesus' words lifted Bartimaeus up, they gave him a sense of worth; they made him stand erect.

To arrive at the end to which Jesus called him – that is, true discipleship, life in company with Jesus – Bartimaeus had to let certain things fall.

The cloak he wore and cast aside is no doubt symbolic of what he needed to throw off.

I dare to see Bartimaeus' casting off of the cloak as an allusion to those opening chapters of the Book of Genesis which I dare to say are key chapters to our understanding of the whole of the Bible.

Daring to cast off his cloak, I see Bartimaeus brought to the point where he enters into that confidence and trust that the first Adam knew before the Fall, when he lived uncovered and was unashamed to be seen in his nakedness, just as he was.

Like Adam before the Fall, like Bartimaeus who cast off his cloak and ran to Jesus, so we are all called to dare to appear before the Lord as we are, trusting that He sees in each one of us (as He sees in every person) someone whom He has loved into being and whom He calls to live in company with Him.

Not only have we not to feel ashamed before the Lord, we should also be careful not to make others feel ashamed.

Above all, we are called to recognise that the Lord is not ashamed of us.

Christ never ignores our cries.

Just as He was attentive to the poor blind beggar, Bartimaeus, so He is attentive to and respectful of those poor, broken people on the margins today, people whom some (and maybe even we ourselves) might be inclined to ignore.

There is a double aspect to the call and challenge of today's gospel. It is for us to dare, at one and the same time, to identify with Bartimaeus, by recognising our need for the Lord's mercy, and with the Lord by being attentive to and recognising the needs of all those who live on the margins – and, indeed, find themselves relegated to that place (the place of the outsider) by those who think they are disciples of Jesus.

Anyone who makes another person feel that he or she is an outsider and unwelcome has clearly not truly grasped the essence of the gospel which is mercy.

May we all see our **mission** as being to show **mercy** to those on the **margins**.

I think this is what Pope Francis illustrates for us by the way he exercises his ministry.

One other key word I associate with his teaching and way of being pastor of the Church is courage and, related to it, encouragement. We find this word courage in today's gospel story. May all of us have the **courage** of Pope Francis to encourage those who need **encouragement** today.