Dear Friends,

From Blindness to becoming a “Seer”

Jericho was one of the places that Jesus made a point to visit on his trips to Jerusalem. His last journey to the region before his trial and execution was no different. Jericho is about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem near the Jordan River. It is known as one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. It is also the first city that the Israelites conquered when they arrived in Canaan after their escape from Egypt some 1,400 years earlier.

Today, Jericho is located within the Palestinian territory known as the West Bank. The city’s current population is about 20,000, and the ruins of the ancient city lie among modern houses and hotels. At the time of Jesus, Jericho was known as an oasis city. In fact, Herod the Great built his winter palace near here because of its warm climate and freshwater springs. The Bible describes Jericho as the “City of Palm Trees.” Since Jericho catered to the rich and powerful during the time of Jesus, homeless outcasts often lined the roads in and out of town because it was a good place to encounter the well-to-do traders, political elites and pilgrims who tend to be generous as they travelled to the Holy City of Jerusalem.

In the Gospel narrative we meet blind Bartimaeus who will not stop yelling for Jesus to have pity on him, until Jesus finally calls for him. We can begin to study this passage from a humorous perspective. Why doesn’t Jesus go over to Bartimaeus? Why wait for the blind man to find his way to Jesus? By repeating this statement “Son of David, have pity on me” over and over, the beggar insists that Jesus owes the healing to him. By shouting it out ever more loudly, the clever beggar makes the entire crowd aware of Jesus’ debt to him.

On what basis does Jesus owe this apparent stranger anything? By addressing him as “son of David,” the beggar publicly identifies Jesus as Messiah. And when Bartimaeus does find his way to him, Jesus asks him what seems like the dumbest question: “What do you want me to do for you?” What on earth would anybody suppose Bartimaeus wants? He’s blind!

But Bartimaeus does not say to Jesus, “I want my sight.” He says, “I want to see.” To want sight is to want a capacity which can be used for all kinds of purposes, make money, go for a walk in the woods. But to want to see is to want the connection with reality that the exercise of sight makes possible. Wanting to see is wanting to know the true nature of reality, hidden in one way from a person when he is blind. It is also a matter of seeing the truth about things, or even of seeing the Truth himself. And when Jesus heals him and Bartimaeus can see, Jesus says that Bartimaeus’s faith has saved him. But why? What does Bartimaeus’s receiving his sight have to do with his being saved?

Once we see what Bartimaeus asks for, the funny parts of the story make more sense. So, Jesus gives Bartimaeus all that he asks for. Bartimaeus sees not only the world around him but also his Lord. And in seeing Jesus, Bartimaeus accepts the Giver together with the gift of sight. Although Jesus gives Bartimaeus the option of going away, Bartimaeus stays by Jesus and follows him. This blind man follows Jesus in the “Way,” a technical term for Christian discipleship.

By setting this story in his Gospel right after the incident of James and John asks for honorable positions of power and Jesus contrasts the behavior of non-Judean rulers with those who hold authority in the ‘new kingdom’, Mark invites the reader further to reflect on the difference. The true disciple is cured of a spiritual blindness—that is, of seeing in Jesus only the miracle-worker and not the suffering servant—and follows him in the Way of the cross.

Be blessed,
Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.
WORSHIP & MEDITATION

FIRST READING
I will gather them from the ends of the world, with the blind and the lame in their midst. (Jer 31:8)

PSALM
The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy. (Ps 126)

SECOND READING
No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. (Heb 5:4)

GOSPEL
The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” (Mk 10:46-52)

GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

When we see God with true sincerity of heart and God passes us along our way, it is only then that we will be able to cry out, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me!” We have to truly want to be healed by, and in union with, God in order for us to reach out to him. If God is only an abstract idea, theory, or someone found in the pages of a book, there is no motivation for a relationship and no desire to seek him. God needs to be real in order for faith to be real. It’s all about the journey.

St. Augustine reminds us that “to fall in love with God is the greatest romance; to seek Him the greatest adventure; to find Him the greatest human achievement.” We strive after many things and mercy is not always one of them. We think that we can find fulfillment and healing in other things only to discover that we are still short and empty. From the moment human beings were created, God has been calling us and seeking us. He has been walking right beside the human story from the minute He first breathed life into the first human soul. Are we able to recognize God as He walks with us? At some point we have to realize that there is only one way to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart and that is in relationship with our Creator. We are called to this. However, we make the huge error of thinking that what we are hearing is coming from somewhere else. We become confused. Every human being would certainly profit with wisdom if they realized Who calls them and to Whom they belong.

Then and only then will we realize that it is only our Divine Master who can give us true vision and heal us. Once we recognize and reach out for the merciful presence of our loving Maker, we will be able to see with our soul, understanding the true nature and depth of all things. God’s mercy is always available. It doesn’t matter how far we have strayed or how blind we become, God patiently waits to console us, guide us and heal us. All we need to do is desire Him. Once we reach out, we also realize that there is no greater love to be found than God’s, no human adventure that comes even close to the thrill of a spiritual search, and no human achievement even remotely as satisfying as union with Him. This is where we belong. This is salvation.
The first reading, Jer 31:7-9, This reading, taken from the book of Jeremiah, tells us of the small number of people, “the remnant of Israel,” who had survived the 721 BC Assyrian captivity (with which the Babylonian captivity would later merge). Jeremiah encourages his exiled fellow Jews with the promise of a homecoming reminiscent of the joy and triumph of the first coming home of their ancestors from Egyptian slavery to the promised land. Jeremiah describes the coming return of the Babylonian captives as they will be led on their joyful journey home to Jerusalem. The passage foretells God’s promise to give His people life in all its fullness. Through their exile and suffering, the people had learned to humble themselves and turn to God with sincere repentance. The returnees would include not only the healthy, but the blind, the lame, and the vulnerable. Originally spiritually blind, the exiled Jews, through suffering, would receive spiritual sight, and they would express their gratitude to God by singing His glories on their way back to their city. The promise of this prophesied journey would be fulfilled in Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem in the company of the lame and the blind, recorded in today’s Gospel.

Moreover, what the prophet had promised regarding the return of the exiles to Judah, would be eclipsed by the ultimate return of all peoples to God, a homecoming Jesus would accomplish through the saving, healing power of his cross.” (Sanchez archives).

The second reading: (Hebrews 5:1): The reading describes Jesus as the High Priest of the new Covenant. It likens him to the class of ancient priests, (sympathetic and patient, not glorifying himself), then distinguishes Jesus from the others (because the Father called Jesus his Son). The people addressed in this letter had been put out of the synagogues when they accepted Jesus. Some were even abandoning Christ to return to Judaism. Hence, the writer of Hebrews tries to comfort them by depicting Jesus as a superior replacement for the priests upon whom they had formerly depended because Jesus was appointed by God to that ministry to serve the people as intermediary between God and man, and as man-God Jesus had empathy for and profound patience with erring sinners.” The Jewish High Priest was a sinner like others, and his role was to offer sacrifices to God for himself and for the people as their representative. But Jesus, sinless, offered Himself as a sacrifice for all sin, and will continue to act as our mediator at “the throne of grace,” until the end of time. Further, Jesus, the Son of God, was appointed directly by God to an even better priesthood (“the order of Melchizedek,” Ps 110:4). In role, person, and appointment, Jesus surpassed every High Priest in ancient Israel.

Gospel Insights

Lessons of Christian discipleship:
The section of Mark’s Gospel that deals with discipleship (8:22-10:52), begins with the healing of a blind man (8:22-26), and concludes with the story of another blind man, Bartimaeus. In between these two stories are three episodes in which the disciples are presented as blind to the meaning of Jesus’ mission and of their own discipleship. Their spiritual “blindness” is evident in their persistent misunderstanding. The gradual coming to sight of the first blind man (8:22-26), stands in contrast to the story of Bartimaeus, who regains his vision at once and becomes a follower of Jesus. The healing of the blind Bartimaeus contains four main elements of Christian discipleship: a) the correct recognition of Jesus as Lord and Savior (“Jesus, Son of David”); b) the acknowledgement of the need for Jesus’ help (“Have pity on me”; “I want to see”); c) ready response to Jesus’ call (“He . . . came to Jesus”); and d) becoming Jesus’ disciple (“... followed him on the way”). “The Church has always taught that the life-changing grace of Christ is made available through the sacraments irrespective of the holiness of the minister or the congregation. In the Eucharist, the sacrament of sacraments, it is not just God’s grace but Christ’s bodily presence which is made available. That means that every Sunday we have the same opportunity as Bartimaeus. Then, why do so many of us go to Mass again and again and walk out the door much the same as we went in? Why so little healing, so little growth in holiness? Maybe because we lack the outrageously bold faith of Bartimaeus. The gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, healing, purification, guidance, all are there for the taking. Hence, in the spirit of Bartimaeus, let’s determine to stop going home empty-handed.” (Dr. Watson).

The Messianic implications: The healing of Bartimaeus has Messianic implications. Jesus commended Bartimaeus because he had correctly understood that Jesus was the Son of David and the expected Messiah. Referring to the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote: “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped” (Is 35:5; 29:18, 42:7).
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND CONVictions

Instead of remaining in spiritual blindness, let us pray for spiritual sight. Each one of us suffers from spiritual blindness. Hence, we need the light of the Holy Spirit to enlighten us. Anger, hatred, prejudice, jealousy, evil habits, etc., make us spiritually blind and prevent us from seeing the goodness in our neighbors and God’s presence in them. A clear spiritual vision enables us to see the goodness in others, to express our appreciation for all that they have been doing for us, and to refrain from criticizing their performance.

We need to have the courage of our convictions. We need people who, like Bartimaeus, will refuse to be silenced by the secular leaders of our society. We must make our politicians realize that our country is rejecting Christian principles and facing a loss of values. A good example of this is the heated controversy over the First Amendment to the Constitution in the U.S. The First Amendment says: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This is a simple statement of the right of an individual to follow his own conscience in worship. Unfortunately, it is often interpreted by activist judges to mean that the expression of all religious ideas is forbidden by the government. This is a far cry from the intention of the founding fathers. James Madison (the primary author of the Constitution) said, “Religion [is] the basis and Foundation of Government…. We have staked the future of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves… according to the Ten Commandments of God.” Even Thomas Jefferson, who coined the phrase “separation of Church and State”, wrote: “God gave us life and liberty. Thus, the liberties of a nation cannot be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God, and that they are not to be violated but with His wrath. Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.”

QUIZ TIME

1. What did the Lord say He would do for Israel?
   A) Gather them from the ends of the world  B) Comfort them  C) Guide them home  D) All of the above

2. When should one take the honor of being high priest?
   A) When he feels like it  B) When he is called by God  C) When he wants more honor  D) When he is called by Melchizedek

3. What did the people tell Bartimaeus to do when he cried out to Jesus?
   A) Touch Jesus’s clothing  B) Yell louder so Jesus could hear him  C) Be quiet  D) Beg for money

4. What did Bartimaeus tell Jesus he wanted?
   A) "I need more money"  B) "I want to see"  C) "I need a home"  D) "I want to have children"

5. What did Bartimaeus do after he received his sight?
   A) Went home  B) Begged for more money  C) Showed the temple priests  D) Followed Jesus

1. How can you help people around you who feel lost or disadvantaged?
2. Learn more about a saint whose weakness helped them to be better disciples … Moses, Dorothy Day …
3. What is one thing that will bring “new vision” to your spiritual life? Share your thoughts

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