

Better or Bitter Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time/B October 28, 2018 **Jer 31:7-9;** Heb 5:1-6; **Mk 10:46-52** (We all need trust, but also expectation and courage to really call out in prayer.)

“Go your way; your faith has saved you.”

In today’s first reading from the prophet Jeremiah we hear **a very bold promise of future blessings, an age of redemption.** Jeremiah himself lived a very tragic life, and it ended very badly for him, but he bore this prophecy. When Jesus was raised from the dead and when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles, they knew that that age prophesied by Jeremiah was upon them. And **Bartimaeus was already at the very cusp of that dawning age of light and saving grace and health.**

Now it is obvious that the Jewish people and their expectations were on a different scale from what actually took place in Christ. The kingdom they expected belonged to this world and to this age, but **the kingdom Jesus inaugurated broke boundaries of time and space to bring us into communion with the Father.** That was Jesus’ mission. Bartimaeus along the way is like us. He was aware of one level of his own need, as we all are, but God was working in him on a deeper level, as **God is working also in us at a deeper level than we even know.** Yes, Jesus restored the sight to his eyes, which is what he asked for, but he gave him more. **At a deeper level he gave him vision for his soul.** “Your faith has saved you.”

Now precisely **what does this faith consist of?** We need to know because we need it too. First of all, very simply **it’s trust in the pity, the mercy, of Jesus.** Secondly, it’s **the expectation that Jesus’ mercy would be powerful enough to help him.** And thirdly, **it’s the courage to be bold enough to call out.** And these three aspects of faith are needed by everyone; **we all need trust, but also expectation and courage, courage to really call out.** That’s not the same thing as just mumbling.

Now in this story we only see one moment, a very pregnant moment, but only one moment in the life of **Bartimaeus**, but obviously his life on a whole was pretty shabby. He **was a blind beggar** in an era when people, sadly, had contempt for those who suffered, because in their own way **they believed that those who suffered like this: blindness, poverty, were cursed by God.** That was unfortunately their belief. It was one Jesus did not share with them, but it was their belief. But we can understand how they got there because we have a hard time too with this question of, well, **why does God seem to curse or ignore or fail to help people in their need,**

why? Actually we cannot ever answer that question as long as we are on the way. As the Whirlwind told Job, look, you will understand all this when it's all over. But it isn't over yet and **until you see the whole picture, you can't know the meaning or the reason for the way things are.**

But we do know this: that God's own Son was not exempt in any way from suffering, pain, or sorrow; so there must be some deep and profound reason for it. We can see something in our own experience. **We can observe that we and others can and do grow from suffering.** We can expand our hearts, and we have seen people who after great suffering have actually come to embrace and forgive people they formerly hated. That does happen; we can see that. St. Augustine says that God wants us to pray, not to inform God of our needs, which he already knows, but to expand our capacity to receive the gifts he wants to give. Now both prayer and suffering do this. They stretch us; **prayer and suffering stretch us so that we can see that every challenge in life, every problem in life, is an opportunity that can either make us better or bitter,** better if we let it stretch us, bitter if we don't. We choose. And there are a lot of people who don't choose to stretch; there are a lot of people who are bitter. Maybe they think they have even tried prayer, but not the kind of prayer of Bartimaeus. Maybe it was the kind of prayer that simply wanted to end suffering.

We might imagine that **Bartimaeus** may have become bitter himself, but in this story of today's gospel he **threw himself, plunged himself, into the mercy of God.** Throwing oneself on the mercy of God, however, **means giving up** certain things that the world really wants and loves, first and foremost **self-will, autonomy, being one's own master.** That we cannot do; we cannot simultaneously throw ourselves on the mercy of God and remain our own master. And that is the problem most of us have, most of the world has. We want to be our own master. If we want God's mercy, we cannot be God's rival. **We cannot supplant God's will for our will.** And we cannot allow our plans to supersede God's plans. And herein lies **the change that the world needs to experience** the light and the healing Bartimaeus experienced, a surrender, **a total surrender to the will of God.** These are all lessons we have to learn on our journey to the Father.