

Bartimaeus

⁴⁶ They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. ⁴⁷ On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.” ⁴⁸ And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me.” ⁴⁹ Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰ He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” ⁵² Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way. (Mark 10:46-52)



“Healing the Blind Man” | Václav Mánes | 1832 | National Gallery Prague | PD-US

This coming Sunday is the [30th Sunday in lectionary cycle B](#). The gospel is the story of Bartimaeus, a blind man, who cries out to Jesus for pity. Despite the rebuke of the bystanders, Bartimaeus calls out even more vigorously. And in so doing he encounters Jesus who asks, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” At first glance it might seem that this is another miracle story in which Jesus reaches out to the marginal. It is indeed a miracle story, in fact it is the final healing miracle in the Gospel of Mark. But it is also an account that is part of a mosaic that Mark has been constructing.

Before we move ahead, let’s recount some of the pericopes that preceded [today’s gospel](#).

- The Gradual Healing of a Blind Man (8:22-26)

In between are predictions of the Passion, Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, the Transfiguration, the accounts of being “on the way” as the disciples argue about who will great in the kingdom, the rich young man who was unwilling to give up all that he had and follow Jesus, and the Apostles John and James asking for places of honor when Jesus comes into his Kingdom.

- The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52)

It is as though these two healing stories form bookends to this section – yet the stories are slightly different. In the first account we are not given a name for the blind person and are left to assume, given the location of Bethsaida, that the person is Jewish. In the second account, the names are Hellenistic and we have some room to speculate that Bartimaeus is gentile. His calling out to Jesus as “*Son of David*” – like the Syro-Phoenician woman – hints at also being Gentile. While there is a good deal of speculation, some scholars propose that there is a missionary paradigm being described. The Gentiles are people “born blind” who suddenly see in the light of Christ. The Jewish folk are people born in the light but have lost their sight; the restoration process will come only in stages. The missionary paradigm is that Jesus’ first mission is to Israel, but the ending mission will be to the whole world.

This week’s gospel especially serves as a dramatic contrast to the gospels of the two previous Sundays. Two weeks ago we heard the story of the man who had kept all of the commandments from his youth and who had many possessions. This was understood in the 1st century as a sign that he had been blessed by God. But he is not able to part with his possessions. He is not able to follow Jesus “*on the way*.” In today’s text, we have a man who is blind and a beggar, understood as a sign that he was a “sinner” and not blessed by God (see John 9 for this traditional view and Jesus’ rejection of it). However, the blind-beggar, throws off his cloak (v. 50), perhaps his only possession, and is able to follow Jesus on the way.

Last week we had James and John seeking positions of honor at Jesus’ side when he entered his glory. In our text, we have a man who is sitting by the side of the road (*hodos* = “way”) crying for mercy (or pity), certainly not a position of honor. In each event we hear Jesus’ words: “*What do you want me to do for you?*”

Let us remember where we are in Mark’s telling of the Gospel, which I would suggest in this part of the gospel is an extended exploration of not only Christology, but also the challenges of discipleship.

Perhaps first among the challenges of discipleship is seeing clearly the One being followed. The first account of the giving of sight comes after a section in which Jesus has performed miracles (feeding the 4,000) only to have the people request more signs. At this point Jesus warns them of the “leaven of the Pharisees.” Yet the apostles still seemed a bit bewildered and failed to understand Jesus’ point.

8:22 When they arrived at Bethsaida, they brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on him and asked, “Do you see anything?” 24 Looking up he replied, “I see people looking like trees and walking.” 25 Then he laid hands on his eyes a second time and he saw clearly; his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly.

Between the bookend stories of giving sight (making things clear) Mark’s narrative continues with teachings about the true nature of the Messiah and what it means to be a disciple. Slowly, slowly the disciples are beginning to see things distinctly.

Image credit: “Healing the Blind Man” | Václav Mánes | 1832 | National Gallery Prague | PD-US

Bartimaeus: location

These gospel verses are the last healing and miracle in the Gospel of Mark. It is easily passed over as another miracle among many, but the story of Bartimaeus (*bar-Timeaeus*; lit. Son of Timeaus) is in some ways the most significant since the restoration of sight is the one miracle not recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are general promises in *Isaiah* that promise healing and deliverance (Isaiah 29:1; 32:1-3; 35:1-10) along with specific promises that in the day of the Messiah the blind will have their sight restored (Is 42:18; 61:1-4), but there is no account of sight being restored. (*Note: the restoration of sight to Tobit is recorded in a Deuterocanonical book*)

The story should also be considered in the light of the readings that have preceded it. Unlike the rich man (Mark 10:35-45) who had everything but spiritual insight, Bartimaeus – who had nothing – saw clearly.

Unlike the disciples and the Twelve who are “on the way” (*hodos*) their vision of Jesus and the Kingdom is coming only in fits and starts. What they seek is glory and prestige. Bartimaeus seeks healing

⁴⁶ *They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging.*

In a simple opening verse, Mark provides two “locations.” The scene takes place on the outskirts of Jericho located fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem and five miles west of the Jordan River. Since the Transfiguration (Mark 9) Jesus has been heading towards Jerusalem, predicting his fate, and now is near the endpoint of his ministry and his life. Jericho was known to be on the pilgrim’s route as faithful Jews made their way to Jerusalem for Passover (and other feasts). By sitting at the city gates, Bartimaeus has positioned himself in a high-traffic area.

The other “location” is Bartimaeus’ position in life. He is blind, perhaps since birth, and supports himself by begging near the city gates. He likely has a cloak (*cf.* 10:50) spread out before him where those passing by can leave coins or alms. He could not be farther socially than the rich man of vv.35-45. His lack of status will be emphasized again when the crowd rebukes him and orders his silence because he dared to speak above his position in society (v.48).

Bartimaeus: Mercy

⁴⁷ *On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.”* ⁴⁸ *And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, “Son of David, have pity on me.”*

Though Bartimaeus was blind, he understood a great deal about Jesus. There is a division of opinion about the expression “Son of David.” Some scholars hold that it is a generally accepted, polite moniker for a Jew. Others hold that it is a title with Messianic overtones as indicated in documents from the Qumran community. Others take it more literally because in Judaism there was a tradition that Solomon, as David’s son, was specially enabled by God to heal (Josephus *Antiquities* 8.41–47). There is something compelling, in the shadow of the City of David, to suspect that the Markan Messianic “secret” is becoming unveiled.

Many among the 1st century Jews held that the Messiah would be a military, conquering figure like King David who warred against the Jebusites to capture Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:6-10). But this is not the “Son of David” to whom Bartimaeus cries out. He cries out to the One who brings mercy not wrath and will enter, not as conquering hero, but humbly on a donkey. As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem, his previous hesitation to allow people to name him as the Messiah seems to be gone.

In other healing scenes, the one healed is told to “go” and not say anything about the miracle. This phenomenon is described as the Marcan “messianic secret.” There are many speculations as to why Jesus does not want word of his mighty deeds known far and wide. The one in which I hold to be more likely is the one in which Jesus does not want people’s perception of his Glory to be seen in the miracles and mighty deeds, but wants them to see the Glory fully revealed on the cross when they can see that God’s love for them has no limits. Now that they are close to the time of the cross, Jesus will not tell Bartimaeus to remain silent. Any attempt to silence the blind man falls to the crowd.

The crowd had probably become quite hardened to seeing beggars along the roadside, and especially at the city gates, crying for alms. Now that a person of importance was coming, they did not want this distraction or delay. Undeterred, Bartimaeus resolutely continued his calling until he succeeded in drawing Jesus’ attention to himself.

Bartimaeus says “*huie David Iēsou eleēson me.*” - *Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me.* Liturgically we pray *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy...), the last vestige of Greek in the western, Latin Rite. So it is odd

the NAB translates *eleēson* as “pity” in its version; “mercy” or “compassion” would have also been good choices. Merriam-Webster carries these definitions for modern English:

- Pity - the feeling of sorrow caused by the suffering and misfortunes of others.
- Compassion - sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it
- Mercy - kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation

Under these definitions, Bartimaeus is not asking for “pity;” he is asking for “compassion” and merciful action on Jesus’ part.

Despite the people around Jesus rebuking Bartimaeus, Jesus' call to the blind man is mediated through human agents. He tells others, "*Call him here.*" They do and Bartimaeus responds. There is the combination of human activities and divine activities to produce the miracle.

Jesus comes to Jericho, people share that news with the blind man, and the blind man responds by persistently calling after Jesus (in spite of the crowd's objections).

Jesus tells others to call the blind man here. The people bring Jesus' call to the blind man. The blind man responds by leaving his possession, jumping up, and coming to Jesus.

Jesus asks a question. The blind man responds with an answer of his need. Jesus declares him healed and it happens. The blind man responds by following Jesus.

France (*The Gospel of Mark*) notes: "The crowd's sudden and complete change of heart indicates the authority of Jesus: they are now as enthusiastic as before they were dismissive, and become the medium for Jesus' call to Bartimaeus" (p. 424).

Bartimaeus: the Call. ⁴⁹ *Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.”* ⁵⁰ *He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.*

Neither the blind man’s social status or the crowds’ rebuke matter to Jesus. It is evident that Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus of Nazareth and that his relentless crying of “*Son of David, have pity upon me*” reflects a conviction, formed on the basis of what he had heard, that Jesus could restore his sight. When Jesus orders that Bartimaeus be called, some in the crowd quickly change their tune and tell him to have courage. He reacts without hesitation and “*threw aside his cloak.*” This action is often passed over without much notice. If one assumes Bartimaeus is wearing the cloak, perhaps it is just cumbersome and would impede him. But if one assumes the cloak is spread out before him as a collection point for alms, then his casting aside the means of income and whatever income he had collected (no doubt representing his riches and wealth) stands in sharp contrast to the rich man who walked away from Jesus rather than let go of his wealth. The blind man also takes his place among others who have spontaneously reacted to the presence of Christ in their lives: Simon and Andrew leave their nets (1:18), James and John leave their boat (1:20), Levi leaves his tax office (2:14); Bartimaeus leaves his location and wealth.

Bartimaeus: the Petition. ⁵¹ *Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.”* ⁵² *Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.*

Jesus replied, “*What do you wish me to do for you?*” One might note that either I miscopied v.51, but the astute student will know that I am citing v.36 when James and John ask for the places of honor. In both verses the verb is *thelō*. Again Mark is drawing our attention to the differences, this time between Bartimaeus and the disciples. Where they ask for glory, power, and prestige, the blind ask for mercy and healing. The blind man’s faith was recognized by the Lord as an affirmation of confident trust in the gracious mercy of God and his power to heal (cf Mark 5:34). The healing was immediate.

Then Jesus gives him a choice: “*Go your way.*” The Greek *hodos* (way) appears again. What “way” will Bartimaeus choose? Jesus adds, “*your faith has sozo you.*” The word *sozo* can mean “healed” or “saved.”

The healing will be obvious in the simple fact that Bartimaeus can now see. But will the man see more deeply to the matters of eternal life? He does and so chooses to follow Jesus. Thus, the cure of Bartimaeus is climactic in the sense that its outcome marks the goal of this Gospel in the life of its readers: He followed Jesus “*on the way.*”

Perking [656]: “Some interpreters think that Mark has placed the healing of a blind man as the final event in Jesus’ ministry outside Jerusalem to show that the disciples would eventually be healed of their spiritual blindness. However, the actual details of the miracle play a minor role in the episode. Bartimaeus exhibits the type of faith that forms the basis for healing. He also cries out the truth that Jesus is the merciful Son of David, and the crowd cannot silence him. Such faith points to the success of Jesus’ ministry, despite the voices of opposition and the misunderstanding of those closest to Jesus. Christians through the centuries have repeated a variant of Bartimaeus’s cry for mercy. The prayer ‘Jesus, have mercy’ was repeated continuously to remind the faithful that God’s mercy is always present.”

Bartimaeus: another thought

An interesting bit of background come from Dan Clendenin at [Journey with Jesus](#)

If “Timaeus” sounds vaguely familiar, you might be channeling your college introduction to philosophy class. Timaeus is the title of Plato’s most famous dialogue and the name of its narrator. In the *Timaeus* and elsewhere, Plato famously contrasts “seeing” the mere physical world while being “blind” to Eternal Truths.

And so Bartimaeus begs Jesus, “Rabbi, I want to see!”

In his book *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato* (1983), the classicist David Runia argues that “the *Timaeus* was the only Greek prose work that up to the third century A.D. every educated man could be presumed to have read.” Would that include Mark?

Is Mark contrasting Greek philosophy with the Jewish Jesus for his Gentile audience? It’s such a tantalizing suggestion. But as the British like to say, for me, it’s too clever by half. In my view, this interpretation is at best a “definite maybe.”

The name Bartimaeus suggests other linguistic possibilities. In simplest terms, the name combines the Aramaic “bar” (son) with the Greek “timaios” (honorable). So, Bartimaeus is a family name. He’s just the son of a father named Timaeus.

More subtly and allegorically, he’s the “son of honor” or an honored person.

Still others point to the Aramaic or Hebrew word for “unclean” (*br tm’*), suggesting that Bartimaeus is the “son of the unclean.”

I like to combine these ideas. Bartimaeus, a down and out blind man, a poor person who begs for money, might be dishonored and marginalized by Greeks, he might be unclean to ritually clean Jews, but in Mark’s telling he’s a person we should honor.

Notes

Mark 10:46 Jericho. At this point, Jesus was only fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem and five miles west of the Jordan River. Some scholars offer that the crowd was possibly following Jesus, came out from Jericho to see him, or were part of a larger pilgrimage crowd moving towards Jerusalem.

Mark 10:48 *And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more.* The crowd thought that Bartimaeus was not worthy to call out to Jesus, impose demands upon him, or take his time, so they told him to be quiet. The blind man did not back off, but continued to cry out to Jesus. This

is expressed in the imperfect tense (*ekrazen*) emphasizing that his call was ongoing.

Mark 10:50 *threw aside his cloak.* The blind man had laid his cloak on the ground to collect alms from compassionate people. He now tossed it aside.

Mark 10:51 *Master.* The blind man addressed Jesus respectfully in a way that may indicate that he saw Jesus as his Lord. The term means “my master” as well as “my teacher”. The word is *rabbouni*, a word used only one other place in the gospels. It is the same term that Mary Magdalene uses when Jesus appears to her post-Resurrection.

I want to see! The blind man clearly trusted Jesus’ power to heal and he had the courage to call out to him despite the crowd’s opposition. This is a picture of persistent faith.

Mark 10:52 *your faith has healed you.* Jesus commended the man’s faith as the means by which he was healed (5:34; Luke 7:50; 17:19). ***followed him on they way:*** That Bartimaeus followed Jesus does not necessarily mean that he became a disciple, like one of the Twelve, but could also mean that he joined the crowd of pilgrims who were accompanying the Master. It would undoubtedly be his intention to go up to the Temple in order to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving for his sight. .

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