

In ancient Israel, there was a prophet by the name of Isaiah. Isaiah challenged what he saw as a depraved society, telling the people that they had turned their backs on God. He said that they lived in a land of darkness; they were a people blind to justice and righteousness, to an extent that they staggered as if blindly drunk. They were confused, hopeless and defeated. Isaiah was speaking of his country and his people, and he pulled no punches. He said that they walked in gloom, groping for the wall like the blind, stumbling in the daylight as if it were twilight, because they lived in a land of darkness.

Isaiah also said that there would be an end to the darkness. Those who walked in darkness would see a great light. “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; the government of the world will be upon his shoulders and his name will be called ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’” We read this passage from Isaiah every Christmas. Into the darkness of human desperation, God shined his light with the Incarnation of Jesus the Christ; those who are blinded by the darkness can see, anew, in Christ. The light of God, the light by which God illumines sin and brings salvation, is Jesus Christ.

I think the gospel reading today dovetails perfectly with Isaiah’s ancient prophecy. Mark tells this magnificent story of blind Bartimaeus, who earned his way by begging at the side of the road. The story of Bartimaeus is not just another healing story. It is archetypal of our own healing, our spiritual healing, and our deliverance from spiritual blindness by the light of Christ. Listen to the story of Bartimaeus. He is sitting by the roadside begging. In his day, there was nothing else for blind people to do. The welfare state did not exist. There was no “Americans with Disabilities” act, or Jews with Disabilities, act. There was no special education; there was no Braille. There was only the mercy of the righteous, of those who took to heart the words of the prophet Amos, “Let justice roll down like the waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” For as Amos also said, “What does the Lord require of you but to love justice, do mercy and walk humbly with your God?”

As often as not, there was no mercy. The ancient world was a harsh world, and while we have clearly made social progress, we have certainly not made nearly enough. My point is that social indifference was the backdrop for Bartimaeus, as social indifference is the backdrop for much of the oppression and suffering that we daily see around us. So, in our story, we have poor, Bartimaeus sitting blindly by the road, alms cup extended, pleading, begging. “Have mercy on me.” Suddenly, the crowd around Bartimaeus grew excited. Something was happening. Oh, how he wished he could see, but he soon learned that Jesus of Nazareth was present and he had heard great things about Jesus. Jesus could heal the blind!

Bartimaeus immediately began to cry, in a loud voice, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” From the perspective of the crowd, and from the perspective of the Lord’s

disciples, Bartimaeus behavior was not a good thing. These were seditious words, this “Son of David” thing. These kinds of words could mean great trouble. These were just the kinds of words that would get Jesus killed, because this kind of talk would quickly get the attention of the emperor’s secret police. “Jesus, Son of David.” The words placed Jesus in King David’s royal lineage. They were the words of the messianic formula. They hailed a king not of the emperor’s choosing. So the crowd pleaded with Bartimaeus to shut up! No doubt, the disciples prayed for the same thing, too.

To bring this story to conclusion, Jesus heard the cry for mercy and showed mercy. “What do you want me to do for you,” Jesus asked? “Please, Lord, my sight,” Bartimaeus replied. “Go your way; your faith has made you well.”

John Newton, the 18th century English slave ship captain turned Anglican priest wrote a hymn, later reset to an American folk tune. We know it as *Amazing Grace*. “Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.”

The story of Bartimaeus is archetypal of the spiritual healing of each of us. It is Christ alone, gently prodding, encouraging, chastising when necessary, occasionally kicking us in the tail just hard enough to get our attention. He enlightens our darkness with his love. He reminds us that God has certain moral expectations of us, including the renunciation of bigotry, prejudice, injustice and oppression, and when we heed his call, he brings us from the darkness to the light of love. If we grow in faith and the love of God, we cannot help but grow in the love of neighbor. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, *Amen*.