

A God who can do all things

21 Pentecost, Year B, 2009

Mark 10:46-52

October 25, 2009

Bartimaeus had three strikes against him. He was who some people would jokingly say was at the bottom of the food chain. The bottom of the pile. He was blind, which in those days meant he was destined to a life of begging and poverty. There were no Stevie Wonders and Ray Charles back then, no books in Braille, no special schools for the blind, no faithful German Shepherds to guide you around town. Bartimeaus had it tough. Being blind meant he would be a beggar, consigned to sit by the side of the road and call out his plea for pity to anyone he heard coming his way. And as we hear this story, we get the idea that the community wasn't very supportive of Bartimaeus. They saw him as a nuisance, an embarrassment, someone you'd rather keep hidden and silent when someone important was coming through town. So there he was: Bartimaeus, this pathetic sole, blind, begging, an outcast. At the bottom of the pile. Three strikes against him.

Now if anyone had good reason to complain and lament his sorry state in life, to be mired in regret and resentment and despair, it was Bartimaeus. And maybe he did feel this way about his life, we don't know. But this story is not at all about feeling sorry for yourself or regretting the past no matter how awful your situation may be. This story is all about the Gospel, the Good News, not the bad news. And there are three things about this Good News that Bartimaeus and Jesus teach us today.

The first thing we learn about the Good News is that it is forward looking. The Gospel is not about looking backward, it is not about being mired in regrets or self-pity. It is about looking forward with hope at what might be possible.

I've chatted with you all before about the Large Hadron Collider, or LHC, the huge new atom smasher physics machine in Switzerland. It's aimed at producing and studying the elusive Higgs Boson, a mysterious subatomic particle that no one has ever seen, but that physicists speculate may be responsible for the way matter came into being in the first trillionth of a second or so after the Big Bang. This is heady stuff, but the \$10 billion LHC has been plagued with problems for the past year or so that have kept it from operating, mundane things like vacuum leaks and electrical shorts, and even not so mundane things like finding out that one of the LHC particle physicists is an Al Qaeda cell member. All this has led some people to wonder if the big machine will ever operate as planned.

In fact, in an article this past week in the *New York Times*, we learn about the latest theory – a very bizarre and crazy theory – by two renowned physicists working at the LHC. [1] They propose that perhaps there are forces from the future that do not want the LHC ever to operate and are doing things to prevent it. The *Times* writer says that when the Collider is scheduled to start up again this December, “Then it will be time to test one of the most bizarre and revolutionary theories in science. I'm not talking about extra dimensions of space-time, dark matter or even black holes that eat the Earth. No, I'm talking about the notion that the troubled collider is being sabotaged by its own future. A pair of otherwise distinguished physicists have suggested that the hypothesized Higgs boson, which physicists hope to produce with the collider, might be so abhorrent to nature that its creation would ripple backward through time and stop the collider before it could make one, like a time traveler who goes back in time to kill his grandfather.” (I've referenced the article below, if you want to read it).

This is a bizarre and unbelievable idea and maybe you'd think these crazy scientists have had too much time on their hands while waiting for the machine to start working. But the truth is: there is no principle of physics that prevents this from being possible. Einstein once wrote to a friend, “*For those of us who believe in physics, this separation between past, present and future is only an illusion.*” Actually, a rather theological statement to those of us who believe in eternal life. And the famous Dutch physicist Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum theory, once told a colleague: “*We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question that divides us is whether it is crazy enough to have a chance of being correct.*” Crazy? We'll see.

Well, while we ponder these strange things about science and whether the future can affect the past, we note that the Gospel story today is not about the past at all – the Gospel is *not* about looking back at the past about what coulda, shoulda, woulda happened if only I or someone else had only done this or that. It's likely that poor Bartimaeus had spent time looking back with regret or perhaps resentment or maybe anger at his past, wishing he could go back and change things, but this story – indeed the whole Gospel, the Good News – is not about looking backwards, trying to change or reinterpret or fretting about the past.

I remember the words to an old Jackson Browne song that hits the nail on the head: *“Though the future’s there for anyone to change, still you know it seems it would be easier sometimes to change the past.”* [2] We can get bogged down in revisionist history about our lives, dwelling on past foibles and flops, insults and injuries, we can focus our energies on reliving them over and over again, re-interpreting past events, hoping perhaps that we can somehow change things that have already happened. To the extent that we are paralyzed to do anything about the future.

The Gospel is not about changing the past, but fixing the future. Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus, not to tell him his sad story and receive pity, but to receive help for the future. He cries out, *“Son of David, have mercy on me.”* Somehow Bartimaeus knows who this Jesus is -- Son of David – he is a devout enough Jew to know that the Messiah would come through the lineage of David. He knew this Jesus was special, the Messiah. Not just another passer-by who might drop a coin in his cup. Bartimaeus knew who the Messiah would be: he would show mercy, and the Messiah would establish a new kingdom where the lame would walk and the blind would see.

So, the second thing we learn from Bartimaeus is that the basis of our hope for the future is Christ.

Today’s Psalm expresses that hope in a God who provides for our future, even when the past and even the present are filled with challenge and trouble:

I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me out of all my terror...

Taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are they who trust in him...

Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord will deliver him out of them all.

The final lesson we learn from Bartimaeus is do not be afraid to ask for big things. Jesus said to Bartimaeus, *“What do you want me to do for you?”* What would you say if Jesus asked you that? Would you hold back, don’t push your luck too far with this guy? Or would you go for it? Bartimaeus went for it. He answered Jesus, *“My teacher, let me see again.”*

Fr. Brian Cox is a very faithful Episcopal priest in California. A few years back, he told Pastor Mary a story about a mission trip he made to Africa. One night during the trip, at a prayer service, a mother brought her son up to Fr. Cox and asked for his prayers. The boy had been blind since birth. Fr. Cox asked the woman what she’d like him to pray for. She looked at him like he was crazy, and said, *“Well, of course I’d like for you to pray that he might be able to see.”* Fr. Cox was shaken by this. He had never considered that he might be asked to pray for something so bold, so huge, so – to our rational minds – so unlikely. He paused and considered protesting or making an excuse, as he didn’t feel comfortable or confident in saying such a prayer. But the persistence of the woman made him realize that he had no choice. He gathered others around him to help with the prayer, and obediently he laid his hands on the boy and prayed. And prayed and prayed for a good half hour. Almost immediately, the boy’s sight was restored. When Fr. Brian tells this story today, it is not with a sense of accomplishment, but it is told with humility and awe at how powerful this God really is.

Now, I’m not saying that for every person who is afflicted with blindness or anything else, they will be physically restored if we just pray hard enough. But I am saying that God expects us to pray boldly, hold nothing back. God may not respond just as you requested – after all God is not a robot that automatically complies with our every detail of our request. If that were true, then we’d be God. No, he doesn’t automatically do exactly what we want at the snap of our fingers, but he does respond – always and faithfully – in a way that we are blessed. God wants us to ask him about big things, just like Bartimaeus did.

In our Old Testament Lesson today, Job has lost everything: his wealth, his family, his dignity, his physical health. Yet he can say to God, *“I know that you can do all things ...”*

Bartimaeus knew that God can do all things. Healed and restored by Christ, he got up and followed him. May we, looking forward, hoping in Christ, boldly calling out to him, get up and follow him too. Amen.

[1] The Collider, the Particle and a Theory About Fate, by Dennis Overbye, *New York Times*, 10-13-09.

[2] from *Fountain of Sorrow*, lyrics by Jackson Browne.