

Blind Beggars

Preached on Quinquagesima Sunday

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

February 14, 2021

Texts: 1st Cor. 13: 1-13; Luke 18: 31-43

In the Gospel for today, Jesus announces his final journey to Jerusalem: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man shall be accomplished." He must die and rise again. "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem." That is what Lent is all about: we go up with him to Jerusalem, we gaze upon and share in his passion, and we are healed and transformed by that vision of the divine love.

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

Nothing that Jesus says here is complicated or technical. You don't need an advanced degree to know what "mocked," "spit upon," "flogging," or "kill" means. "But the disciples understood none of these things. and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said." The disciples had ears, but they couldn't hear Jesus' words. They had eyes, but they were blind to the truth. How is this possible?

The disciples couldn't see because they didn't want to see. They didn't want his words to be true. They didn't want to follow a leader who suffered and died. They didn't want to be part of a failed movement. Jesus was supposed to be a king, so where was his army? He claimed to be the Son of Man, the title of ultimate authority, but where was his glory? The Messiah was supposed to destroy the enemies of God, but Jesus had been going around telling people, "love your enemies"! Thousands of Jesus's followers had already left him. The Twelve stuck around because they had no other place to go; but even they were getting frustrated with Jesus. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die, and nothing could change his mind.

So here is Jesus, passing through Jericho on the way to the cross. His disbelieving disciples are with him. A huge crowd goes before him and behind him. But not one person in the crowd, including the disciples, recognizes who Jesus is or what he is about to accomplish. Though they have eyes, they are blind, every one of them—except the blind beggar. Hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Jesus of Nazareth, the rabbi from a town in Galilee without a great reputation. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" ([John 1:46](#)). The people of Nazareth didn't think so. They said, "Isn't he the carpenter's son?" and they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

“Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And [the blind beggar] cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Notice what he calls Jesus: not Jesus of Nazareth; not son of Joseph; but Jesus, Son of David. The beggar can’t see Jesus with his eyes. He can only hear what people say. Yet somehow without the benefit of eyes, and contrary to what he hears, he recognizes Jesus for who he really is. This is a miracle of faith! The beggar confesses what everyone else in the crowd is unable to see. “Jesus is the Son of David.” This means that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He *is* the King of Glory, and he is on his way to Jerusalem to be crowned. The Lamb of God is passing by bearing the sins of the whole world, and only a blind man can see him.

This is how God works. He hides the gospel in plain sight and it looks like foolishness to those that are perishing. The Pharisees asked Jesus once, “Are you saying that we are blind?” Jesus said to them, “If only you were blind, then you would have no sin. But because you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (John 9:41). The Pharisees looked at Jesus and saw just a man. The crowd knew he was from Nazareth and could perform wonders. The disciples had been with him from the beginning, learning, living, eating, and sleeping beside him. If anyone should have been able to understand Jesus’ plain words, it was them. But *all* of them were blind. Only the blind beggar could see, for he saw Jesus with eyes of faith.

The great miracle in this text had already taken place when the beggar cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” God had already given him the gift of faith. The beggar confessed Jesus as the Son of David.” And believing that God walked among us, he cried out, “Have mercy on me!” Remember Luther’s last words, “We are all beggars.” Indeed we are. This is what it means to be a Christian. We live only by the mercy of Jesus. We wait in faith at his table, knowing that even its crumbs are more than enough to sustain us. This is the faith that recognizes Jesus, the Son of David, where others only see a man from Nazareth. This faith discerns the Body and Blood of Christ where others see only bread and wine. This faith makes the good confession, promising to suffer even unto death, rather than fall away. This faith cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

In the eyes of the world, the only thing more offensive than a beggar is a beggar who is confessing Christ. The crowd tried to make him shut up, “but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” The ones trying to silence the beggar were the very ones leading the procession, the ones who appeared to be walking with Jesus. And it is the same today. Wherever the true gospel is preached, it always causes offense, often within the church. “Stop talking about the Cross. Stop talking about our sin and weakness. Stop telling us to turn the other cheek. Instead, tell us to take back what is ours. Assure us that the world will again take us seriously. We want our former power, prestige, and cultural influence restored. We want to be strong. How can the power of God be revealed in our weakness?”

Well, it should be clear by now that the Gospel of a Suffering God will never be an easy sell. We don’t want to hear that we need that much saving or that we are called to imitate the Lord’s humility and die to self. The world calls that “being a doormat” or some kind of self-hatred requiring an understanding therapist. (Everyone knows that all

our problems are due to low self-esteem and lack of “self-care.”) But the Gospel will not pander to our desire for self-worship. If it does, it is no longer the Gospel.

Instead of our needing to love ourselves more, the Gospel says we have a sin problem leading us to focus on ourselves way too much. Furthermore, we cannot fix ourselves and thereby earn salvation. We need a rescuer, and God sent us his Son. He knew what he had to do from the beginning. Earlier in Luke, we are told that Jesus set his face like flint toward Jerusalem. The *Via Dolorosa*, the Way of Grief, didn’t begin at the governor’s palace where the cross was placed on Jesus’ back. It began at his baptism, where your sin, my sin, and the sin of the whole world, was laid upon him. From that moment, Jesus was headed to Calvary and nothing could stop him. He didn’t give in to Satan’s temptations to bypass the Cross. He didn’t listen to Peter’s rebuke or to the pleading of his disciples. He was on his way to suffer and die for us, and nothing could stop him—until some ill-mannered beggar yelled out “Son of David, have mercy on me!”—and he stopped. Jesus stopped and he waited. And when the beggar had been brought near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, I want to see.” Jesus said to him, “See!”_And immediately, his sight was restored.

We are like that blind man at Jericho. We sit by the wayside begging and can't see what's going on because we are spiritually blind. The reason for the journey to Jerusalem, the meaning of Jesus and his sacrifice, is perhaps not very clear to us. But, like the blind man, when the Lord asks what we want him to do for us, we also need to say: "Lord, I want to see!"

Our journey to Jerusalem, our Lent, is to be a journey into light, a journey into understanding the mystery of divine love in the passion of Christ. Can the lessons and the disciplines of Lent really do that for us? That really depends on where our heart is. In our Epistle this morning, Paul tells us about the unsurpassed worth of love. Without it, we “become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” In other words, merely a noise-maker.

Love is the greatest of the virtues, and through it all other virtues can be nourished. Love connects us to the God who is love, and when we connect with him, we receive His bounty and grace. As we place ourselves before him, surrendering our pride and self-concern, he will work in us to soften our hearts so that they can be transformed into hearts that love, rather than those that turn in upon themselves. This is why whatever disciplines we engage in this Lent will be worthless if we are not seeking to do them in love. Thus, if we fast without love, all we will do is grow hungry in our bitterness, entitlement, or indifference to others. But if we discipline ourselves under the mantle of love, we will act not just for our own self-correction, but for the good of others.

Charity, as St. Paul explains in today's Epistle, is to be the very essence of our life as Christians. The passage, 1st Corinthians 13, is often called “the love chapter.” But the love spoken of here is so much more than romantic love. In fact, you probably noticed that our Prayer Book, following the King James, uses the word “charity” instead of “love.” This translates the Greek word *agape*. This word and its corresponding verb *agapao* are used in the New Testament to describe the love God has for his Son, the love

God has for his people, and to express his essential nature. Thus, having been loved this way by God, and therefore seeking to become more like him, Christians are to also love others with *agape*.

Faith is an excellent thing, no doubt, and so is hope, but they are only a beginning. In heaven there is no faith; in heaven there is no hope. For heaven is the knowledge and possession of that eternal good, towards which faith and hope can only aim. In heaven there is only charity, the bond of love which unites lover and beloved. Without that love, all our achievements, no matter how grand, are worthless.

Therefore our journey of Lent is not just a journey of faith and hope, but a journey of love, a journey whereby we become more firm in that bond of love which unites us to God and so to others as well. It is a journey whereby we grow up in love. "When I was a child, I spake as a child", says St. Paul. We are so often like children who take little thought for the future, who wish to indulge their appetites without inquiring into their ultimate value. Lent is a time to grow up and put away childish things.

The disciplines of Lent are a serious matter, being fundamentally a matter of the nourishment of our souls. Wouldn't it be a good idea to try to wean ourselves a little bit from the poisonous sweets of self-indulgence and worldly allegiances? Wouldn't we be better off with a little more time for prayer, a little more time truly seeking God's face, and a little less time drowning him out with worldly distractions? Wouldn't we be more nourished by a little more time in the Word of God and a little less time imbibing the self-serving narratives of the world? Habits are formed by disciplines; and the habit of charity is not formed by self-indulgence and the endless pursuit of worldly ends. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:21) There is one pearl of great price, and, like the merchant in the parable, we may have to sell quite a lot to buy it.

Jesus bids us to go up with him to Jerusalem and to find our treasure there. May he open our blind eyes, and give us grace to do just that.

In the Name...