

Sermon: PENTECOST 22, October 25th, 2015

In the Name...

There was once a classic British TV series set in a department store. The title of the series was the question sales staff would pose to browsing customers, "Are You Being Served?" It's always struck me that's really a strange question because obviously if a customer is wandering around they aren't being served. Much more sensible would be the question, "May I help you?"

That's the sort of question we ask when someone we know has received some bad news or is in some sort of trouble. Something in us triggers an instant reaction to respond, somehow. Natural disasters bring this out. Immediately after Hurricane Sandy, millions around the country contacted aid agencies and churches offering to help before anybody had any idea what needed to be done. It's because we bear the image and likeness of God within us and He is the ultimate helper.

Jesus, of course, is God and knows everything that needs to be done, so when he says to a blind man who has been calling out to get his attention, "Is there something you want me to do?", we may pause and look confused. Isn't it obvious? Maybe. Maybe not.

St. Mark's account of the healing of Bartimaeus is exceptional because this is the only place in the Gospels where a person healed by Jesus is identified by name. And Mark mentions the name not only once, but, twice. He gives it once in Aramaic, "Bar-Timaeus", and he gives it again in Greek, "uios Timae." Both mean "son of Tima." This very unusual emphasis is a clue that the name is an extremely important part of the story and we need to know it to understand the point of Jesus saying what he did.

In the Ancient World, a name wasn't just something cute randomly chosen out of a book or a TV show, as it seems many are today. A name was considered almost sacred and could be used to express something about a person, either a hope or a characteristic. So what does "Bartimaeus" express? Well, that depends on whether you speak Aramaic or Greek.

That is, the same combination of letters in the root word, t-i-m-a, means completely different things in different languages. For example, in English, the word "gift", g-i-f-t, means a present, something you look forward to receiving. But, in German, g-i-f-t, the exact same letters, means "poison", not something you want to have given to you.

Well, in Aramaic, t-i-m-a, pronounced ti'ma, means "defilement." Bar-ti'ma could be a name given to him because he was blind. If you recall from another incident, the Jews believed that blindness was a punishment for some defilement or sin either of the man or his parents. But, in Greek, t-i-m-a, pronounced tima', means "honour" and we get the word timocracy from it meaning a society, like Japan, which values honour.

So Mark is telling us that a man who is supposed to be a child of shame is, in reality, a child of honour and the exchange between him and Jesus proves this point.

We're coming to the end of Mark's Gospel. Jesus is leaving Jericho and heading with his disciples and a large crowd to Jerusalem for the Passover. He knows this is his last trip. Ahead of him lie Holy Week and the Cross. There's an air of excitement and, for the more discerning, an air of foreboding, when, all of a sudden, into this highly charged atmosphere comes an unwelcome intrusion, the raised voice of a blind beggar. "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me".

Some in the crowd resent this buttsinski and tell him to shut up, but, he will not be silenced and he shouts again, "Son of David, have mercy on me".

And Jesus stops. The title which Bartimaeus has just used for Jesus is a title, in Jewish theology, reserved for the Messiah of Israel and nobody, up to this point in the gospel, has used it to describe Jesus. It gets his attention. He stops.

Now you might think, at this point, that he'd walk over to the blind man and say a few kindly words, but, he doesn't. Instead, from where he's standing, he commands, "Call him here." Summon him. Hmm. That doesn't seem very friendly. In fact, it seems a bit imperious for Jesus to behave like that, but, he's setting the scene for the lesson we're about to learn and in the response to Jesus' words is where the miracle happens.

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, the shameful figure of pity who sat on the ground with a cloak in front of him to catch coins which passers-by might drop, does three things. He throws the cloak away, he stands up, and he walks straight to Jesus.

He throws the cloak away. He makes a break with the past. He discards the small coppers which are his only means of survival because he believes he will no longer need them. And he stands up. No more sitting on the ground for people to literally look down on him or for him to be pestered by dogs and crawling things. He has regained his posture and his dignity. He is a man. And he walks, right up to Jesus. It doesn't say he was led. Jesus had said "call him" not "bring him." Bartimaeus parts the crowd like Moses parts the Red Sea. He knows exactly where he is going.

And it is in this context that Jesus says, ""What do you want me to do for you?" You see, in one sense, what does Bartimaeus need? When it comes to faith, he has 20/20 vision. Surrounded by people who could see all his miracles, Jesus was by none of them called, "Son of David".

When it comes to confidence that Jesus is indeed the rightful bearer of that title, Bartimaeus has no doubt. He does not spring up from the ground to approach a wise rabbi, a powerful preacher, or even a miracle-worker. He stands on his feet to approach his Saviour.

The gift of physical sight is almost an anti-climax to the story. What is important is that the beggar has become a giver, giving a living, walking, testimony proving the power of Jesus to change a person's life from one extreme to another, to turn a bad name into a good one, to give worth to the unworthy, to turn shame into honour. And the same is true for us.

There are a lot of Aramaic "bar-ti'mas" in this world - sons of shame. People who are depressed, lonely, afraid. People who may be considered and even consider themselves pointless, meaningless, worthless. We've all known more than a few. Maybe we've even been one, ourselves. But, the lesson of today is that any of us can become a Greek "uios Timae", a person of worth, dignity, and meaning. All it takes are the eyes to see Jesus as Messiah, the heart to break with the past, and the willingness to respond to his call.

"Take heart. Be of good cheer." the people said. "He is calling you." Indeed he was. And he is. Calling each of us who call him Son of David - Messiah and Saviour. Calling us to cast aside the past, spring up, and stride purposefully over to him. Calling us to trust in our faith and focus on him. Calling us to see ourselves as he sees us and realize our true worth.

Are we being served? He's standing ready.

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