

Quinquagesima

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel:

And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

In today's Gospel from St. Luke, we find our Lord with His face set toward Jerusalem where He is to make His final appeal to God's people, an appeal that will be met with rejection.

Then, rejected as the Messiah, Jesus is to face the ordeal we call His passion.

It is not without courage that Jesus set out on this last journey, a journey that was to end in His crucifixion. He knew the pain and agony that awaited. It was the path He had chosen in order to fulfill the promise of the Law and the Prophets for the redemption of mankind.

Whatever the sacrifice, whatever the cost, in perfect obedience to His Father's will and purpose, Jesus accepted the inevitable cup of suffering and humiliation and set out toward Jerusalem.

Though time and again, Jesus had told the twelve of what was to come, His disciples still failed to fully grasp what He was telling them. Even when the time came and Jesus was hanging on the Cross, the Apostles were shocked and shattered at what transpired.

Though our Lord had time and again warned them of what was to come, they continued to be obsessed with the idea of a conquering king who would use his power in the end to overcome his enemies.

Perhaps, this is why St. Luke used the words, *and this saying was hidden from them*. They were blind to the truth that our Lord had given them.

Perhaps, also, this is why St. Luke tied the story of the blind man so closely to the warning of what was to come.

If we put ourselves into the context of Biblical Times, we would see the pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem traveling in groups. Those along the way, in the towns and villages who could not make the journey, would line the roadways to watch the travelers as they journeyed.

It was quite common for a teacher or rabbi to use a trip to teach, and his students would group around him as he walked along. Such was the case with Jesus and His followers. They would be grouped around Him as they walked, keeping as close as possible to be able to hear His every word.

Naturally, when a disruption, such as the blind man crying out, would occur, members of the group would try to put an end to whatever was interfering with their being able to hear their teacher.

But, in this situation, the disciples had met their match: the more they tried to keep the man quiet, the louder and more persistent he became. St. Mark gives him a name: Bartimaeus.

Bartimaeus most likely had joined those along the roadside as an opportunity for begging. Undoubtedly, being blind, he was also poor as well.

With Jesus and His group approaching, the din would have increased, especially with those along the roadside proclaiming to one another that a notable personage was passing by. Indeed, by this time, Jesus was accompanied by a rather large entourage as they walked with Him straining to hear Him speak.

Bartimaeus was told by those around him that it was the prophet of Nazareth passing by, the One known for His ability to heal the sick and lame. The blind man seized on the opportunity and shouted out: ***Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me.***

His cries were described by Luke first as ***shouts*** and then as an almost animalistic cry or emotional scream. Efforts to quiet him down were futile. So, Jesus stopped and addressed him, ***Saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?***

And the blind man answered: ***Lord, that I may receive my sight.***

To which Jesus responded ***Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee.***

Here, Jesus, in His response to the anguished Bartimaeus, demonstrates His love and compassion. He shows us His willingness to respond to our needs when we approach Him from the depths of our hearts.

But what is the connection between the blindness of the Apostles and the blindness of Bartimaeus?

Perhaps, St. Luke was demonstrating to us the difference between spiritual blindness and literal blindness.

The Apostles were suffering from ***spiritual blindness*** in that they were fixated on the prophecies of the Messiah's Glory and could not see those which spoke of His suffering.

Bartimaeus, of course, was suffering from *literal blindness* in that he was physically blind.

St. Luke brings into focus a deeper understanding of sight, that it can be spiritual as well as physical. He sees sight in this instance as meaning the *faith that saves*.

When our eyes are opened spiritually, it brings to us spiritual discernment and insight. And while the *faith that saves* may bring with it physical healing, it is the healing of our souls that leads to the ultimate victory.

Though forewarned by our Lord, the Disciples were blinded by earthly expectations thus unprepared for what transpired in Jerusalem; their notion of the Messiah was colored by their prejudices; they read in scripture the prophecies of a glorious and victorious Messiah, and failed to read the prophecies of the *suffering servant*.

Are we like that in our spiritual lives? Do we see only the glory of salvation but are blind to the potholes in the pathway that leads us to our goal?

Are we so blinded by worldly glitter that we are prevented from seeing the effort required to attain to that glory of salvation?

Bartimaeus did not receive his sight by whimpering: he cried out to Jesus from the depths of his soul.

Even as the Apostles faced many challenges, their spiritual sight was restored through an abiding faith deep within their souls.

So, what about us?

Can we be like Bartimaeus and cry out from the depths of our souls to our Lord to open our spiritual eyes?

Lent is a solemn time in our yearly cycle of worship where we focus not so much praise and thanksgiving, but where we look inward to examine ourselves and refocus ourselves spiritually.

What are we looking for in this self-examination? not just our sins, our failings, our unworthiness, but the very nature of our inner being — our heart, our soul, our mind.

We may well ask: are our hearts filled with love? are we compassionate? are we giving? are our thoughts God-ward? are we blind to the beauty and the power of God's Love?

Indeed, where we fall short, what are we doing about it?

Bartimaeus had an answer: cry out from the depths of your souls; cry out that your spiritual eyes may be opened to the saving faith that comes through Jesus Christ.

God offers us His Love and Grace if we will just open our spiritual eyes to see and take. It is ours.

That his Love and Grace abounds and surrounds us becomes a reality only if we open our spiritual eyes to gaze upon it.

We see it in the beauty of God's Creation: all of His Creation. We see it in the worship of the Church. We behold it dearly when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine.

And it is most clearly revealed when we look upon the Cross, for there our Lord poured out His love for us with His Blood.

If the Apostles, those closest to Jesus, were so blinded, what hope is there for us?

Indeed, hope is one of the defining forces of our faith. Just as the scales fell from the eyes of St. Paul, so was spiritual sight restored to the Apostles by virtue of their faith and the infusion of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Hope. It is a compound emotion consisting of both desire and expectation. In Christ Jesus that hope is fulfilled. He is what we should desire and in Him is the fulfillment of our expectation for eternal life.