

Blindness

If we are at all honest with ourselves we have to admit that our attempts to journey with Jesus are often very confusing. Very often he seems so distant from us. Like the disciples in Mark 10:32 we seem to be in a daze, where we can barely see him. Something seems to cloud our vision. We grope after him in the darkness, hoping we have not lost him completely. In the depths of our hearts we begin to wonder if our faith can be very real. Because of this, to notice that the great journey at the heart of Mark's gospel is bracketed by two men who were blind, and who were healed, can come as an answer to prayer. They were blind too! Then Mark must have known; he is talking to me. And we go back to the stories with new insight, new hope, our hearts open to hear what the Lord has to say to us.

And they came to Bethsaida. And some people brought to him a blind man, and begged him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?"

And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees, walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly. And he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village" (Mark 8:22-26).

As we listen before this in silence, and go back to it time and again, we begin to wonder: "What is this blindness?" For in

an intuitive way we know this blindness is our own. Here as we open ourselves to the Lord in the stillness of this story he is taking us by the hand and leading us out of it. First he starts to let us sense this blindness that traps us, for this is the beginning of our being healed.

If we look to the story that immediately precedes this one, we can see that though the twelve have been with Jesus, have heard him preach, seen his healing power, they cannot see the true meaning of the miraculous feeding of the four thousand. They cannot see in it the sign of the eschatological banquet. Jesus asks them "Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?" And the painful answer is "no." They cannot see it. And what is even more painful is that in the midst of the story I come to see that I can't see it either. As I turn these painful words over in my heart I go back to my own life and the promise of God's love that has been so often offered to me. How often that gift has been missed. Not rejected, but missed because I never even saw it. This unspeakable love of God for me has been there in the care and support of family and friends. I've taken it all for granted or I've passed through it so preoccupied that I scarcely ever opened my heart to the huge mystery that called me. But here it dawns on me and I can see much more clearly how I have always been his beloved.

Going back to the story another time teaches me other things. Meeting Jesus, hearing his call, has saved me from meaninglessness. But the reality of this slips away from me. I see others desperately searching for something to keep them going, hoping against hope that their drifting lives might go somewhere. I see the real terror that grips them, and forget that I have been freed from this desperation. I

live so comfortably in my faith that the Father loves us all and that therefore our lives are eternally significant. This forgetfulness seeps into my heart and blinds me. Then there is the much more intimate matter of the call to deepening involvement with the One who loves me. The Lord's gentle but daily invitation to prayer, to deepening surrender, can be so quiet that the chatter of my life drowns out this fateful call. The result is that I have neglected my true destiny to be the Father's beloved. I blindly disregard the gift of his intimacy; I flounder in my own darkness, saying he is my Father by hardly responding as a beloved son. I rush through my prayers; or I put them off until tomorrow, only half realizing the consequences of the decision I so easily make.

Even when I am open to God's gift of his love in the people he sends into my life, or in the intimate stirrings of my own heart, I often forget that this is an other worldly love. We only glimpse it here; but that glimpse is enough to give us hope, to lead us on a voyage of faith where we will leave behind our old selfish ways. Precisely because this hope is so unlimited we are never quite going to possess it here. There will always be the poor and the hungry, those who have been brutalized and have become brutal or pathetic in return. There will always be misunderstanding and loneliness. At their best marriage and community are deep enough and whole enough to point beyond themselves, but at their worst they seem claustrophobic. And when the loneliness, and the fear, and the claustrophobia pile up, we can forget that we are called by an other worldly hope. Then we want it all now. In my own desperation I can look to "the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." Like them I can despair and turn away from this unspeakable hope. I can look for something else to fill my

heart. Like the Pharisees I can turn to "keeping the rules," hoping in my own integrity, or respectability, a clear but torturous conscience to save me, to let me feel that I am somebody. Or like Herod I can look to power, pleasure, security, in the desperate gamble that they will give me what my heart needs. All of this is what blinds us.

If we look forward from the blindness of the man in Mark 8:22-26, it clearly points to the cross. Peter finally, with God's help, can see that Jesus is the Anointed One of God; but he cannot, he does not want to, see the cross. It is too horrifying. It cuts against the grain. It threatens and would dismantle the whole way he has constructed of looking at himself and the world, of making sense of his life. Like all of us, Peter has been born into a world that is overwhelming, and yet one in which he must find a safe place if he is to survive. Loneliness, confusion, a sense of his own fragility, but most of all the fear of his own death loom about him. Like every man he has to learn a way of dealing with these human dilemmas. Often enough we really don't know, or we can't let ourselves know, what the problem really is. It is too much for us to face. But we hit on an ingenious way of moving past it. For example we try to avoid death by being very popular, or by achieving something in our work of lasting significance. Because one or two times that helps us cope with the terror of oblivion, or seems to, we go back to it again and again. These attempts to escape become written into the way we live, so that we no longer even notice them. Hiding in these illusions we set out to protect ourselves. That self, as we see it, needs whatever pleasure it can get. It needs to be comfortable, to avoid whatever is painful or confusing. Sometimes it needs to avoid the true self's hunger for truth, because that would force it to face the lies it lives. Sometimes it won't let the true self's need to

surrender to God even surface, because this would demolish its attempt to pretend that it is self-sufficient. This is a pretense it hides in because it cannot face its destiny of death. All of these are illusions that distort and submerge the true self, the self who is the beloved of the Father; but at the same time they allow the fabricated self—the self you and I and Peter have constructed in our attempts to survive—to keep functioning.

Jesus' cross challenges all of these illusions. The cross is pain. It is defeat. It is the collapse of all of these false hopes. The whole world we build around ourselves that corresponds to these illusions crumbles in the face of the cross. Still the blindness that fosters these illusions can be very subtle. I have gotten good at talking about the cross. I have learned to compartmentalize my life and relegate the cross to areas of my life where I can handle it, where it is not too awkward. Or I discover a false cross that somehow fits into and reinforces my illusions. Then I can go along as I always have, but now with the pious support of the cross of Jesus. This is very convenient. But Peter hasn't had time to develop all of these smoke screens. The reality of it hits him head on. For him it is truly horrifying. It is not just that it would be difficult. It is that his whole way of living is being struck out from under him. Any other way of living seems to be literally unimaginable. As I slowly open my heart to this story in faith, the Lord starts to get through to me. Just as in the story, I gradually begin to see. I see how these things are present in my life, how my illusions keep me going, how I live off them, and how false they are. Here I experience the same fear and panic that swept through Peter's heart. "This would be to die; it would be the end of the very self I think I am." But then in the midst of that terror, the Lord is present gradually healing me. He grasps us deeper than our terrors

and somehow we let go of part of our old self as we cling to him. We hear the call of this gentle Jesus as he gradually strips us of our illusions and we go with him. But often this stripping seems to be anything but gentle.

The second healing from blindness comes at the very end of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you." And throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Master," the blind man answered, "Let me receive my sight." And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way (Mark 10:46-52).

Of course, many of the same things come up again, but there are also some very important differences. In the earlier story, the blind man was brought to Jesus. Here, he hears Jesus is coming and painfully aware of his blindness he begins to cry out. The paradox is that this man can see how desperate his situation really is; and this grounds his resolve. He pushes aside as unimportant what others think. He cuts through the opposition of the fickle crowd. Nothing else counts but to get to Jesus who alone can heal him.

This brings out something new. Having listened to the other story, having come to the point where we are beginning to have a sense of our own blindness, when we enter into this story, we very quickly take Bartimaeus' words as our own. With a deep sense of our desperate state we cry out "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Then we hear the Lord saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" Here, again, it is crucial not just to have begun to understand Bartimaeus, but to have entered so deeply into the story that you become him. Then those words that we desperately need to hear, are addressed to you and me: "What do you want me to do for you?" The response that comes welling up out of our depths is "Master." Nor is this just politeness. It is who Jesus is becoming in my life and in yours. He is the master of the journey. Although I cannot see very well, I have been learning to follow him, to trust him, not my own illusions. Before we ran from pain. The result was that often our prayer was "don't let me be hurt." Here the request is "Heal me of this blindness," though at this point I know this will, indeed it already has, entailed a stripping.

There is another shift in this story as compared with the first one. Here the cure is instantaneous. In the first story the emphasis was on how Jesus gradually heals us of our blindness. Here the story points to the results of this healing. The blind man is freed to follow Jesus along the way, to join in his journey to Jerusalem, where Peter did not want to go. As we, in prayer, inhabit this story we know that the Lord is there healing us, bringing us with him on his journey, preparing us to embrace his cross.

Living within these stories can give us a very different way of looking at our lives. Our own disappointments, or the times we were drawn into the huge pain that touches those we love, can be seen in a new way. Haven't these turning points often been the times when Jesus has invited us to let go of our illusions and false hopes and go with him? Weren't these times when the Lord called us to go with him where our fears didn't want us to go, to leave behind what we thought we had to have if we were to survive? A lot of this

pain and confusion in our lives, this dryness we experience in our efforts to be faithful, this crumbling of our old ways of protecting ourselves, this increasing ability to see the games we play, this is not just wasted pain, the home ground of cynicism. Seen from within these stories, we can begin to see some of it for what it is, the place where Jesus is stripping us of our illusions. Here Jesus is the Lord of our disillusionment, for he is freeing us from our illusions, and bringing us into the Kingdom of his Father. To come to see this lets us transform many of the painful facts of our lives into mysteries by discerning in them this saving encounter with the Lord.