

April 17, 2011

Palm Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since the blind man at Jericho was certainly well known among the early Christians, it is not clear why the New Testament remembers him only by his patronymic: Bartimaeus, "son of Timaeus."

In the Gospel of Mark, which includes our earliest written record of the healing of Bartimaeus, that story forms the climax of a literary motif: the "way" of the Cross.

Although the word "way" (*hodos*) appears earlier in Mark, only near the end of chapter 8 does it start to become thematic. The scene is placed at Caesarea Philippi, a city well to the north of the Holy Land, beyond the Golan Heights. From this point Jesus begins to move south towards Jerusalem, for his final encounter with the forces of evil and death.

Along the southward journey, two other places are named: Capernaum and Jericho, each one closer to Jerusalem.

In each of these three places---Caesarea Philippi, Capernaum, and Jericho--- Jesus gives a prophecy of what will be befall him at Jerusalem (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34). The Savior is on the move, walking south to where he will suffer and die.

Mark draws attention to this journey by the repeated use of the word "way" or "road"---*hodos*. Thus, he tells us, "Now Jesus and his disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road [*hodos*] he asked his disciples, saying to them, 'Who do men say that I am?'" (8:27) Within four verses, Jesus gives his first prophecy of the Passion.

Right after the second prophecy of the Passion---in the following chapter--- Mark describes the disappointing response of the Apostles: "Then [Jesus] came to Capernaum. And when he was at home he asked them, 'What was it you disputed among yourselves on the *hodos*?' But they kept silent, for on the *hodos* they had disputed who among them was greatest" (9:33-34). Mark lets us contemplate the irony of the setting: Walking after Jesus along the way of the Cross, these men were entertaining aspirations of personal honor.

The cost of true discipleship was high, as another man learned in the following chapter: "Now as [Jesus] was going along the *hodos*, one came running, knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?' As it turned out, the inquirer was not exactly thrilled with the answer Jesus gave him: "Go, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me"

(10:17-22). This incident, which, Mark tells us, takes place along the *hodos*, contains an explicit reference to the Cross.

That is to say, Jesus' inquirer, who "had great possessions," received an invitation identical to that extended at the first prophecy of the Passion: "Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (8:34).

Shortly after the invitation declined by the rich man, comes the third prophecy of the Passion: "Now they were on the *hodos*, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then he took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would befall him: 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn him to death and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and scourge him, and spit on him, and kill him'" (10:32-34).

This third prophecy of the Cross is the setting for Jesus' encounter with Bartimaeus, of whom Mark says, "blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the *hodos* begging." Jesus met someone humble and desperate enough to receive the word of the Cross. Here was a man begging along the road to the Cross. For three chapters Jesus had sought such a man, and now, says Mark, "Jesus stood still and commanded him to be summoned." At the prayer of Bartimaeus, Jesus healed his blindness. All along the way of the Cross, the Savior had been surrounded by the spiritual blindness of his closest disciples, but here was someone who really wanted his blindness to be healed. So, what happened to Bartimaeus? Mark tells us: "And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the *hodos*" (10:46-52).

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