

Psalm 118

The last time we encountered a blind man was just before the transfiguration.
Just before the transfiguration, Jesus encounters a blind man.
And now, just before the triumphal entry, Jesus encounters a blind man.

The transfiguration and the triumphal entry are the two places in Mark’s gospel
where Jesus’ identity is most clearly revealed.
And both are preceded by the opening of the eyes of the blind.

Three times, now, Jesus has predicted his coming death and resurrection.
Three times the disciples have missed the point.

The opening of the eyes of the first blind man and the transfiguration did not help.
The opening of the eyes of the second blind man and the triumphal entry will not help either.

No amount of healings, exorcisms, or other miracles will open the eyes of the disciples.
Only the Holy Spirit can open their eyes –
and the Spirit can only be poured out if Jesus dies and is raised up from the dead,
and is exalted to the right hand of the Father.

And yet...

there is one who “gets it” better than the disciples.

And he gets it while he still blind!

1. The Blind Man Sees (10:46-52)

46 And they came to Jericho.

Jericho is at the foot of the ascent to Jerusalem.

From the Jordan Valley there is a steep climb of more than 3500 feet to Jerusalem
which is only 13 miles away in a straight line.

To give you some perspective, the Jongsmas live exactly 13 miles from here
(in a straight line).

Just imagine a 3500 foot rise in elevation
between here and the Jongsmas!

But this was a preferred route for pilgrims,
since it gave them a much more pleasant trip through the Jordan Valley,
leaving them with one hard day up into the mountains,
rather than the mountainous route through the hill country.

But Jericho is also where Joshua began his conquest of the Promised Land.

And remember that Jesus is simply the Greek form of Joshua.

The last time Joshua came here, the walls of Jericho came crashing down.

Jericho is also the place where Elijah crossed the Jordan and went out into the wilderness,
and where Elisha came back across the Jordan to begin a new conquest.

Now for a third time, the conquest of Israel begins from Jericho,
as Jesus prepares to ascend the mountain to Jerusalem.

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd,

This is, after all, the Passover –

and so many pilgrims are preparing to ascend to Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside.

*47 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!”*

Over the centuries the legend had developed that Solomon was an exorcist
with power over the demons.

So when Bartimaeus calls Jesus “the Son of David”
and asks him to “have mercy on me” –
he is likely thinking of Jesus as the healer-king.

And truly, the hands of the king are the hands of a healer –
and so the rightful king will be made known!

But many in the crowd do not understand this,

48 And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

*But he cried out all the more,
“Son of David, have mercy on me!”*

You need to understand that *no one* in Mark’s gospel besides Peter
has ever addressed Jesus in Messianic terms.

Jesus has been viewed as a great prophet:

“some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say a prophet”

Bartimaeus is the first among the crowds to recognize that Jesus is the Son of David.

49 And Jesus stopped and said,

“Call him.”

And they called the blind man, saying to him,

“Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.”

50 And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

51 And Jesus said to him,

*“What do you want me to do for you?”
And the blind man said to him,
“Rabbi, let me recover my sight.”
52 And Jesus said to him,
“Go your way; your faith has made you well.”*

Literally, your faith has saved you.

The word here, σωζω, can either refer to physical or spiritual salvation.
There is a very obvious physical reference –

And immediately he recovered his sight

but there is an equally obvious spiritual reference –

and followed him on the way.

The language of this passage is the language of discipleship:

Jesus “calls” Bartimaeus (in verse 49 you see this word “call” three times),
and Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way.

“Bartimaeus, now set free from his blindness,
represents all those who have found enlightenment and follow the Master.”
(France, 425)

Think of this in terms of the contrast with the rich young man.

Just a few days ago, a wealthy young man came to Jesus,
and asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I’m sure the disciples were thinking,

“this is exactly the sort of person we want with us!”

But Jesus called him to radical obedience –

“sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven;
and come, follow me.” (10:21)

Now they have this blind beggar following Jesus –

well, not blind anymore!

But he’s still a ragged beggar!

What sort of rag-tag following is Jesus seeking?

He turns away the wealthy and calls the poor!

I am convinced, brothers and sisters,

that the church of Jesus Christ will not succeed

in her current attempt to woo and win the power-brokers of society.

Or rather, if she does, it will result in her own self-destruction!

If your goal is to woo and win the power-brokers,

then you will subtly adjust the call of discipleship to make it a little easier!
And the result will be a truncated Christianity that has nothing to say to our culture.

In fact, that is *precisely* what happened in the 19th century.

Charles Hodge expressed his concern that the church was no longer preaching to the poor
and was increasingly focusing on the wealthy.

A large part of that was that Scottish immigrants were generally poor in the 18th century,
but did very well for themselves in the early 19th century –
and so a lot of Presbyterians became wealthy!

But in the process, the Presbyterian church became synonymous with wealth and power.

And the result was that the Presbyterian church became enslaved to the culture.

My favorite 19th century ruling elder, Stephen Colwell, put it this way in 1853:

Few seem to perceive what appears fearfully evident to the writer, that our existent
Christianity is almost universally corrupt, and is becoming more so continually; that
unless its present tendencies be speedily reversed, a state of worse than medieval
darkness will soon settle upon Christendom; not a state of intellectual decrepitude and
enslavement, but one of intellectual triumph and haughty independence; not a state in
which the Church, like a besotted despot, will drag men in chain-gangs behind her bloody
car, but one in which man will rise in proud supremacy, and either trample the Church
under foot, or else spare her in Gibeonite degradation, to become a 'hewer of wood and a
drawer of water' about the gorgeous Temple of Mammon! Or, to say the very least, the
Church and the world will move on in harmony, neither disposed to assert its own
peculiarities. (*Charity and the Clergy*, xi-xii)

Colwell understood what happens when the church ignores the poor:
the church becomes obsessed with power and privilege.

It's not that we should ignore the powerful.

Jesus loved the rich young man that came to him.
But he did not water down the call of discipleship.

When Jesus bids a man come,
he bids him come and die.

If the wealthy and powerful can accept that message –
if they can humble themselves and sell their possessions, give to the poor
and come follow Jesus,
that's great!

Jesus calls the least likely and welcomes those who have nothing to contribute!
Because it is from these that he intends to build his kingdom!
He calls the weak, the foolish, the poor.

And he bids them come and die!

We are called to preach the gospel of Jesus to all nations.
The Jews thought that wealth and power were a sign of God's blessing.
They should have known from the Psalms that this was not necessarily true!

Jesus demonstrates that the wealth and glory of this age is nothing
compared to the wealth and glory of the age to come.

Heavenly treasure is far more desirable than earthly gold.

And as we have seen repeatedly in recent weeks,
the only way to that heavenly glory
is the way of the cross –
the way of suffering,
the way of service,
the way of humility.

And now Bartimaeus – the one who was blind, but now he sees –
follows Jesus in that way.

Because in the following scene, we see very clearly who Jesus is –
and for one brief moment, so does everyone else!

2. The Triumphal Entry (11:1-11)

*11:1 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives,
Jesus sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them,*

*“Go into the village in front of you,
and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied,
on which no one has ever sat.
Untie it and bring it.*

*3 If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’
say, ‘The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.’”*

Why does Jesus send them to get a colt?

Passover pilgrims were expected to walk into the city.

There is only one reason why you would want to ride into Jerusalem for Passover:
you want to attract attention!

This is no spontaneous outburst of Messianic fervor:

Jesus is orchestrating the triumphal entry.

Processions in the ancient world were very rarely spontaneous.

You start with a group of dedicated followers,

and then onlookers are drawn in by the hubbub and commotion.

Jesus deliberately sets up a scene that will look like the coronation of Solomon.

We were told in the previous verses that a great crowd was coming with Jesus

from Jericho to Jerusalem.

They heard Bartimaeus identify Jesus as the Son of David –
and Jesus responded by opening his eyes.

So you have a large crowd with Jesus which is ready to believe that this is the Messiah.

All he needs to do is hop on a donkey, and his disciples
(the 12, Bartimaeus and others who followed him)
will start proclaiming that this is the Son of David,
and other pilgrims will be drawn into the procession.

*4 And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it.
5 And some of those standing there said to them,
“What are you doing, untying the colt?”
6 And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go.*

Genesis 49:10-11 spoke of the scepter of Judah
and said that the ruler from Judah would tie his ass’s colt to a vine.

*7 And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it.
8 And many spread their cloaks on the road,
and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields.
9 And those who went before and those who followed were shouting,
“Hosanna!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!
Hosanna in the highest!”*

This comes from Psalm 118 –
the shout “Hosanna” means “save us now!”

Psalm 118 is one of the Hallel Psalms that were sung every Passover.
The pilgrims would have had Psalm 118 on the tips of their tongues.
Here they are paraphrasing verses 25-26

*25 Save us, we pray, O Lord!
O Lord, we pray, give us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

The crowds are declaring that the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem
is the coming of the victorious king returning to his city.

In Zechariah 9 the prophet had spoken of this day:

*9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;*

*righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

Jesus deliberately enacts Zechariah 9 as a picture of the coming kingdom.
He has come to Jerusalem to provoke a conflict with the authorities.

Now, some have wondered, why didn't the Jewish or Roman authorities
do anything about this "pretender" to the throne of David?

With respect to the Jews, no doubt it took them by surprise.

Jesus has not been going around the countryside stirring up Messianic expectations.

In fact, Jesus has been insistent that his disciples *not* refer to him as the Christ.

So while the priests and scribes do not like this Galilean's preaching,
they are not yet overly concerned about his political agenda.

And the Romans?

They are used to these pesky Jewish noisemakers!

So what if there is a big hubbub

and everyone talks about the latest Messianic pretender?!

If they cracked down on every crackpot, it would be a waste of time and energy!

Jesus has no army, no known political aspirations –

let the little people blow off steam.

It is Passover week – the week that the Jews celebrate deliverance from Egypt!

Naturally there will be some anti-Roman blow-hards

talking about the coming of the Davidic Kingdom.

(Even a week later Pilate does not seem particularly concerned
about Jesus as a credible political threat)

11 And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple.

And when he had looked around at everything,

as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

We'll see more about the significance of this next week.

For now it is enough to see that the King has come to his own.

He has come to the temple and is looking around –

he is planning his next move.

But it is late, so he does nothing –

nothing but *look*.

He sees.

He knows.

He understands what is going on in his temple.

When Jesus is just “looking around” he is not passive.
He sees the disorder in the temple.
He sees the dysfunction in his church.

All throughout the Old Testament we are told over and over again
that “the LORD looked down from heaven”
or “the eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous” (or the wicked).

When you hear that God sees something,
what do you expect to hear next?

That God *does* something!

And indeed, that is what we will hear.
The King has come to his own city.
And he sees.

I want you to think about that in terms of our life together as the city of God.
Our Lord Jesus Christ is head of his church.
And he sees.
He sees the disorder in our lives.
He sees the dysfunction in our relationships.

And the king has come to make things right.

But the way of making things right may not be what you expect!
Jesus’ disciples expect to see the Romans overthrown and the kingdom restored.
That *will* happen.
300 years later Constantine will bow the knee to Jesus
and the Roman empire will submit to the rule of the Messiah.

But that *doesn’t* happen through the politics of this age.
There was no war – at least not waged with the weapons of this world!

Rather, the overthrow of Rome came about through the politics of the age to come.
It was because the apostles taught their disciples
to follow the way of Jesus.
It was because the church was seeking a heavenly kingdom
that earthly kingdoms fell before the preaching of the gospel.

In the Reformed churches today
there are two competing visions of how to think about these things.

Some argue that the church should try to transform culture.
They tend to focus on the movers and shakers and try to be at the cutting edge of culture.
I wonder at times what they would say to the rich young man:

“Hey, don’t worry, you can use your wealth to further the kingdom!”

Others argue that the church and the world comprise two different kingdoms,
and so therefore the church should not be particularly concerned
about the things of this age.

The church should preach the gospel, save souls,
and leave the care of the poor to private charity or state intervention.

I also wonder what they would say to the rich young man:

“Fine, you are wealthy. So what?”

Neither the Two Kingdoms model nor the Transforming Culture model
adequately account for what *Jesus* himself did for us –
and called us to do.

The church’s business is *not* to transform culture.

In that respect I am with the Two Kingdoms folks.

But the church’s business *is* to live as the kingdom of God.

We are to be a counter culture that demonstrates to the watching world
what the Kingdom of God looks like.

If the result of that is that the rulers of this age are humbled and broken
and they repent and believe the gospel,
thanks be to God!

And then we will call them to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Jesus.

But until that day – and even *in* that day –
we are not to worry about whether the powerful “get it.”

We are to work diligently to live according the pattern of our master,
as *we* deny *ourselves*, take up *our* crosses, and follow Jesus.