Christe Eleison

October 25, 2009 (Proper 25)

Mark 10:46-52

This Sunday's sermon was given by David Nelson, a parishioner at Parish of the Messiah:

Today's gospel has all the elements you might expect to find in an epic poem or a piece of fantasy: a hero weighed down by tragic loss suffered for years, the appearance of a charismatic royal leader who has the power to redeem that loss, opposition to the hero by those surrounding the royal leader, a persistent single-minded effort that breaks through that opposition, recognition of the hero by the royal leader, restoration to wholeness, a place in the new kingdom. If Homer had written this story it would probably have taken up a few hundred pages. Virgil might have written a few pages more. J.K. Rowling could easily have reached five hundred. Mark, however, tells the story in a single, deceptively simple, paragraph. And it was only after I'd read it four or five times that I began to appreciate just how deceptive that apparent simplicity is. In fact, I've decided that Mark should be read like a good mystery story, the kind that requires you to pay close attention to the facts that the author has scattered along the way and then to ask questions about what these facts might mean.

So here are my questions. They may be different from yours, but since this is my sermon I'm afraid you're stuck with mine. There are three of them. Why does Mark mention the blind man's name? Is there significance to the location? Why does Jesus ask the blind man what he wants?

First I want to look at the matter of names. Names matter. They tell us something about a person. They tell us about family background and origins Some names, for example, derive from occupation. We have the Smiths, the Millers, the Chandlers, the Tiffanys (who made silks) and the Felts (who made hats). Other names derive from place. The Feltons take their surname from a small town in England. It means a rocky or stony hill. The Janeways originated in Genoa. The Meadows lived on land where they cultivated grasses. Then there are clan or family names. The McLachlans trace their origin to the 5th century Ulster royal family of O'Neill. It was Lachlan Mor who gave his name to the clan. The Maclachlans supported the Celtic church, because the clan and Saint Columba were both connected to the royal family of O'Neill.

If surnames tell us something about family history, first names tell us something about a family's hopes and prayers for the newborn: Amy, loved; Abdullah, servant of Allah; Daniel, God is my judge; Timothy, to honor God.

A this point you may be wondering why I'm nattering on about names. Well, here's a curious thing. Mark records eight healings. The first person healed is Simon Peter's mother-in-law. She's identified but not named. The next six are anonymous – a leper, a blind man, the man let down through the roof. So Bartimaeus stands out. But Bartimaeus is a surname, bar Timaeus, son of Timaeus. And while the bar form is Hebrew Timaeus is Greek. Perhaps Timaeus was a God-fearer, a Greek convert. Perhaps Bartimaeus is seated on the road outside the city not because it's a good place to beg but because he's considered an outsider. And maybe that explains why many in the crowd suggest that he should just shut up. We're not always careful about the stranger at the gate.

The question about location is, I think, somewhat less speculative. Jericho is about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. It was built around a spring fed oasis. Josephus describes it and the fertile plain surrounding it, in glowing terms. It was a fashionable district inhabited by wealthy Jews. Zacchaeus was one of them. There were groves of palm and balsam that produced considerable income for the royal family. Herod built his winter palace just south of the town.

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Jericho was also a destination for pilgrims who went down from Jerusalem to bathe in the Jordan. If you wanted to avoid Samaria you took the road to Jericho. Unfortunately the road leading from Jerusalem to Jericho goes through the mountains. The mountains provided a base of operations for robbers who hid in the rocky caverns dotting the area and could appear without warning. Jesus sets the parable of the good Samaritan on this road.

If you put all of this together it seems likely that Herod's soldiers kept a careful eye on the area. And if we add to this the likelihood that Jesus was not too far away from the palace when this story takes place. it's understandable that people might get a little nervous when someone when someone starts shouting "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." Sure it's a call for mercy but it's also a declaration that Jesus is the royal messiah. This is not likely to go down very well inside the palace.

In any case a number of people in the crowd tell Bartimaeus to lay off. And in response he ups the volume level. In fact he screamed. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." And this is exactly what we say or sing whenever there is a Kyrie in the service – Christe Eleison – Christ have mercy. It's the same Greek verb. I don't know about you but when we say that in the context of the service it's always had overtones of "I am throwing myself on the mercy of the court." "Please withhold the punishment that we deserve." The verb can also be translated "Have pity on me." I recognize, Jesus, that I'm not going to make it by myself, but you can pull me through. It is a recognition of my limitations, of who I am. Of who Jesus is.

And Jesus says to Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" It's the same question that we heard him ask James and John last week when they wanted first dibs on the seats of honor. "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus replies, "Let me see again." And Jesus restores his sight. And Bartimaeus, who now is free to go, chooses to walk down the road after Jesus, to become a follower of the way.