

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Bartimaeus

It's typical of Mark to tell us his name. So many people are healed or transformed by coming to Jesus; and the Gospels conceal their names, perhaps so that we can identify with them more easily, and think ourselves blind or crippled or possessed as they are, and see ourselves promised healing and life. Paradoxically, I feel close to Jairus, whose daughter hovered between life and death, and Zacchaeus, holed up in his tree because he was too short to see and too hated to ask for a place at the front, and poor Bartimaeus, who sits blind by the roadside because it's not safe to walk far, and who begs because he has no way to earn a crust. Their names remind us that they had lives like ours, and we know that our blind man had a father called Timaeus, a Greek name; no doubt dead by this time, so that his blind son was out begging, a pitiful figure.

The Blind Man's Voice

He raises his voice, and he shouts something remarkable. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and we are in the tenth chapter of Mark, only three short chapters from the crucifixion. *Son of David*, he shouts, *Jesus! Have pity on me!* Think of his immobile face, the useless eyes turned up in his head as with all his power he yells this sensational Messianic title: so that they curse him and tell him to be silent. *He* won't be coming to Jerusalem, they know: because the blind, the lame, the disfigured and the deformed were forbidden in Leviticus to bring offerings to the Temple. So his sitting beside the road rather than walking along it is a sign of spiritual disablement. Yet Jesus contradicts the crowd, and insists on summoning to him the one man who has greeted him with that resonant title, *Son of David*. Surely there's a paradox here, if not an irony: the sighted crowd, who can go to Jerusalem, silencing the blind man who cannot, because he is saluting the Christ with his true title!

Qualified To Pray

What gives Bartimaeus the right to pray is his blindness, which teaches him his need, and his paradoxical insight, which gives him the right way to call upon Jesus. It works; Jesus responds at once, and tells the crowd to call him. Let us take that aboard; Jesus knows they have been dark-holing him and piling on more rejection: and instead of simply going

to the blind man himself, he tells the crowd to call him. The unctuous toads change their tone at once; *Courage*, they say, *arise: he is calling you!*

The Call Of Jesus

This Gospel began with the calling of disciples, who mysteriously left everything and followed; the call of Jesus has enormous, irresistible authority. See Bartimaeus, throwing off his cloak, and stumbling through the wondering crowd, to get to the Messiah. This drama is not played out in the light of day: its true stage is in the darkened, reduced world of the blind beggar, for whom sound may be the only real communication. Yet he seems to have powerful special knowledge of the one who has called him. He throws off his mantle, like someone who is stripping for action, and addresses Jesus with an endearment: *Dear Master, that I may see again!*

Bartimaeus Is Coming With Us

What happens next is so much one thing, that it is all put into the same simple sentence: *At once his sight returned and he followed him along the road.* There is no idea that his sight returned, and then he had a long think about it, and eventually decided he'd like to see more of the man who had made him see. It's all done in one stroke: he was given the gift of sight, and he followed along the way - which we know as the Way of the Cross. We never hear him mentioned again, so that his little story sinks into the silence where the past is buried, awaiting the Last Day when all will be made known. But for a moment the bright eye of the Gospel has fallen on a poor man with a huge faith, and we see him just long enough to recognise the lineaments of Christianity in him. He suffered; he called on the Christ; he inherited the light; and he followed Jesus towards the mystery of the Cross.

Where Were We?

If you're still reading this Bulletin, the likelihood is that you're one of the crowd who go with Jesus. Crowds differ; they are often moved along by authority, or fanaticism, or curiosity, or mass fear, or just by some strange drift of their own. We are different. We have seen wonders, and like Bartimaeus, we follow in faith. *Fr Philip*