

The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22; Mark 10:46-52; Hebrews 7:23-28.

Job 42:1-6, 10-17 is Job's response to the second speech by God (ch. 41), that speech that is likely addressed directly to Job himself. Job acknowledges the power and wisdom of God in dealing with him as God has, even though it seemed to be unjust. Through this time of agony, and even in the midst of conflict with his friends as well as confusion at God's intentions, Job recognizes that God has been at work for Job's transformation.

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear," Job states, "but now my eye sees you" (42:5). In other words, Job is stating that at one time, he knew God intellectually and theologically; that is, he knew "about" God. That was his state when he had both great wealth and family, before Satan came before God to enter into a contest over Job's soul. But now, through the reality of his suffering and of being stripped of all that he once possessed (as well as having to endure the criticism of his friends), now "my eyes see you". That is, he once knew about God, but now he knows God! He now has come to experience God personally and in the very depths of his inner being. Although unimaginably painful, Job's experience of being all has brought him to rely upon God even more, and so he now knows God as one "face-to-face".

The result of coming to such knowledge of God is this: "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (vs. 6).

Verse six is actually very difficult to translate into English. The Hebrew can be translated in two distinct ways, and there is no clue from the text itself how the author intended it to be understood. It can be understood as a confession of one's sin and one's inferiority to God: "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (the traditional translation). But the Hebrew verb translated "I despise myself" can also be translated "I hate" or "I reject" (cf. Jer. 31:37; 33:26). And the Hebrew verb, *nikhamti*, can just as well be translated "rue" or "regret" as it can be translated "repent" (cf. Gen. 6:7; I Sam. 15:11; Jer. 4:28; 18:3). Therefore, the passage can be as legitimately translated "I reject and regret dust and ashes" as it can be translated "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes".

The intriguing reality, therefore, is that the text gives us two conceivable ways that Job could have reacted to his trial. It could be read the traditional way that Job has come to a new understanding of God that brings him to repent of a sinfulness that earlier he did not recognize was his condition. Or it can equally legitimately be read that Job has, in his coming to know God at a new depth, also come to the recognition that God's actions are a complete mystery to him and that he is consequently not sorry for having confronted God. He can, in the final analysis, either be saying, "I repent of my sin" or he can be saying "I will reject the "dust and ashes" of being proved wrong". Either Job is repentant or Job is "bloody but unbowed"! And the text gives us no clue as to which way of translating the text is the one intended by the author!

Whatever is Job's response, God responds to Job. If Job is repentant, God may accept that confession. If Job is liberated through his refusal to be beaten, God may accept that response. Either way, verses 7 through 17 end the book of Job with his full restoration. The drama that was introduced in the first two chapters of the book that pitted God against Satan with Job as the

target now comes full circle. All of Job's former wealth is restored, and is in fact doubled over what he held previously. And he becomes the father once again of seven sons and three daughters. Job has been vindicated because he never cursed God (1:11; 2:5) and God was consequently glorified through Job's faithfulness and obedience.

There is an additional intriguing wrinkle in this story. In these final lines of the story of Job, the writer tells us, "(Job) named the first (daughter) Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Kerenhappuch. In all the land there were no women as beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers" (42:14-15). For the patriarchal society in which the book of Job was written, the inclusion of these verses is outrageous. The sons are not named while the daughters are, and their names are all about hope and building the future. No characteristics are given of the sons, but the author tells us that the three daughters are beautiful. Finally, the text tells us that Job left the three women "an inheritance along with their brothers". This was simply not done in the ancient Near East. Daughters never received an inheritance. If a man were to die without sons to inherit his fortune, it would go to the next male in the family – but never to his daughters, wife or any other woman.

What is the author implying about the newly restored Job? Perhaps he is suggesting that through his own deep suffering, Job has become far more sensitive to the plight of the powerless (for instance, women), and is by his own actions seeking to rectify such injustice. Perhaps he is suggesting that a profound change has come over Job as a result of his experience – a change that sees him standing for justice just as he stood up for his innocence, unrepentant for having confronted God. At the end of his life, Job uses his money to act justly toward his daughters, just as, at the apparent zenith of his life that proved its nadir, he stood up to God and refused for his suit to be dismissed!

Thus, the book of Job ends with the words, "Job died, old and full of days" (42:17). He dies a far richer man than he was at his prime – not simply rich in goods and cattle, but rich in children and even richer as one who has discovered a relationship with God that manifests itself in acting justly toward humanity, even though it defies all convention.

Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22 is an acrostic (as is the entire psalm), with each verse beginning with the appropriate letter of the Hebrew alphabet (except *vav* that should follow verse 5). Traditionally, it is attributed to David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech (actually, King Achish – I Sam. 21:10-15) so that this Philistine king thought him mad and rather than imprisoning or killing him, let him go. However, the psalm perfectly captures the spirit of Job, as well.

This psalm is essentially a hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for God's rescue of the psalmist. It is divided into four parts. The first part – verses 1-10 – simply testifies to God's rescue of the psalmist, and therefore praising and thanking God. The second part – verse 11-12 (which is not included in today's reading) – is a wisdom reflection. The third section – verses 11-14 and also not included in today's reading – instructs the reader how living in awe, respect and fear of the Lord will lead to the doing of good, the departure of evil and the pursuing of peace – life as God intends life to be lived. The final section – verses 15-22 – presents God's reward of those who seek to live their lives in harmony with and working for the fulfilling of

God's intentions for the world (vss. 15, 17-20, 22). It also deals with the fate of the "evildoer" – one who lives his life for his own purposes and ignores God's intentions for the world (vss. 16, 21).

This psalm is best known for its almost-proverb like statements that have become famous (and which are also very comforting for the reader). Here are some of the best-known:

- ? "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth" (vs. 1).
- ? "My soul makes its boast in the Lord; for the humble hear and be glad" (vs. 2).
- ? "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together" (vs. 3).
- ? "I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears" (vs. 4).
- ? "The poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord and was saved from every trouble" (vs. 6)
- ? "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (vs. 8).
- ? "The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (vs. 10).
- ? "Depart from evil and do good; seek peace, and pursue it" (vs. 14).
- ? "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry" (vs. 15).
- ? "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit" (vs. 18).
- ? "He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken" (vs. 20).
- ? "The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned" (vs. 22).

Mark 10:46-52 is both a strategic and strategically placed story. It is the final story of Jesus' Galilean ministry and thus the close of the itinerant section of Mark as a whole (the next story begins both Holy Week and Jesus' final days, when the systems seem finally to have won). It is also a story that summarizes the first ten chapters by concentrating upon Bartimaeus as the perfect example of discipleship (and what it is that Jesus has been working to accomplish) in contrast to Jesus' other disciples and in contrast to the powerful elite of Israel's systems. So, in every way, this story is meant to summarize the Gospel of Mark, up to this point.

Arriving in Jericho on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus, his disciples and a large crowd accompanying them pass by Bartimaeus, a blind beggar sitting by the roadside. When he hears it is Jesus passing by, Bartimaeus sees his opportunity and seizes it. He begins crying out in a loud shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Those on the fringes of the crowd try to silence him, afraid that he will draw Jesus' attention from his journey to Jerusalem. They realize that Jesus sees people as far more important than plans, and will make havoc of his schedule in order to go to the aid of a suffering individual. But their efforts to silence this beggar don't stop Bartimaeus, who shouts even louder.

Jesus does here the blind beggar and goes to him. He asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man answers, "My teacher, let me see again". Jesus doesn't heal him. Instead, he says to him, "Go, your faith has made you well". And the text tells us, "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way" (10:52).

This story concludes Jesus' Galilean ministry. And it does so by Mark giving us the example of a perfect disciple, one who thoroughly and unquestioningly trusts Jesus, displaying total faith rather than fear. As such, he is intentionally contrasted with the twelve and with the representatives of the system.

Bartimaeus is contrasted with the twelve disciples. In the immediately previous story, Jesus compared for his twelve closest disciples the difference between the Roman (and Jewish) use of dominating power and his use of relational power (10:32-45). He made this contrast because of his disciples' refusal to accept the inevitable consequences of his actions (and their expected actions), but rather they preferred the unthinking embrace of unilateral power for themselves (wanting to be princes in a dominating kingdom led by "King Jesus"). It is highly intentional on Mark's part to have the Bartimaeus story immediately follow the revelation of the disciples' continued commitment to dominating systems. In fact, it is intriguing that Jesus asked of Bartimaeus exactly the same question he asked of James and John: "What do you want me to do for you" (10:36; 10:52)? But what a difference were their responses!

James and John had asked for chief power positions in the kingdom of God that they envisioned as a replication of the Roman Empire. They wanted to be vice-emperors! But Bartimaeus only wanted to be healed! The disciples wanted power and privilege; the beggar simply wanted his vision restored. The disciples didn't want to see the truth. Bartimaeus was open to whatever Jesus might reveal to him – no matter the price. That is why Jesus declared he had "great faith", making his healing inevitable.

Bartimaeus is also contrasted with the leaders of Israel's political, economic and religious systems – and in particular, with the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:17-31). The rich man, who is at the pinnacle of Jewish power, rejects Jesus' call for him to embrace the kingdom of God. This poor, blind beggar doesn't even wait to receive a call from Jesus; he assaults heaven, "springing" up, coming to Jesus and following him "on the way" (into Jerusalem and to the cross).

The meaning of the Bartimaeus story, so strategically placed at the close of Jesus' Galilean ministry and on the eve of his entering Jerusalem to begin the countdown to the crucifixion, is clear. It will be in the "Bartimaeuses" of society that Jesus' kingdom of God will most surely be planted. The rich, many of whom may be tempted to embrace a relational society of justice and economic equity, will "turn away sorrowfully". The systems will neither be conquered nor reduced in order to enter God's kingdom. Nor can Jesus truly depend on his disciples, for they are driven by fear and doubts, and are still tempted to embrace the power alternatives of the systems.

It will be among the poor, Mark is saying, among the beggars, among the blind, among those pushed to the side of the road by both systems and disciples – it is among these poor in whom hope still lies for the embracing of the kingdom of God. For the first shall become last, and it will be the last who become first, as Jesus builds his kingdom upon the earth!

Hebrews 7:23-28 continues its contrasting of the efficacy of the priestly system of Israel and Jesus' high priestly work.

First, there were many high priests, because each was removed from office by his death, and another was appointed in his place.¹ Because he never faced eternal death, Jesus, on the other hand, continues to remain our high priest forever (7:23-24). Therefore, since Jesus' priesthood is eternal, he can eternally and unendingly save us (vs. 25).

Second, the Levitical priests had to make sacrifice repeatedly (according to the sacrifice, either daily or annually) in order to guarantee continued redemption of the people. Jesus' sacrifice, on the other hand, was once-for-all, for the offering of himself remains a continually efficacious sacrifice for all who have received it (v. 27). That is so, because whereas the priests were themselves sinners and thus had to sacrifice for the forgiveness of both their own sins and the people's sins, Jesus is "holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (v. 26). How many ways can you say "sinless"?

Third, the sacrifice that was offered in each case is also profoundly different. The priest sacrifices a lamb or other ritually spotless animal – simply a symbol for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus, on the other hand, sacrificed his own life, choosing death on behalf of the world (vs. 27). Thus, Jesus is the "spotless lamb" above all lambs who gives his life to assuage the sins of the world.

The author of Hebrews summarizes his entire argument by stating that when one contrasts the old and new covenants (testaments) as manifested in their respective priesthoods, the old priesthood was appointed by the Law setting up its sacerdotal function. But the new priesthood (the redemptive work of Christ) was appointed by God's action (vs. 28). The old law appointed weak and sinful men to do what only God could do – forgive sins. But God appointed his sinless "Son who has been made perfect forever" (vs. 28b). That is why our trust cannot lie ultimately in human beings (e.g., priests, politicians or businessmen) or in the systems of which they are a part. Rather, we dare only to fully trust in God-in-Christ for our salvation, our redemption and our liberation so that we can be, in our corporate as well as personal life, Jesus' people in the world.

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¹ Throughout much of Israel's history, the high priest remained so for the remainder of his life, being replaced only after his death. During the Roman occupation of Israel, however, the high priest was appointed for a short time and then would be replaced by another appointee, selected by Rome. This was done in order to keep too much power accruing in the hands of the high priest that could become competitive with Rome.