

Sermon for Quinquagesima Sunday – Luke 18:31-43

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day He will rise.”

Our Lord’s third and final prediction of His coming crucifixion in Jerusalem could hardly be more explicit and clear. “Everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.” Between Christ’s prediction and all that the prophets wrote, there should be no real surprises. But it’s not hard to surprise a blind man, and the disciples are blind.

Yet that doesn’t stop the Lord, thanks be to God! He doesn’t need their understanding. He tells them the truth whether they can handle it or not.

As they make their way through Jericho, a crowd gathers. A blind man, whom St. Mark’s Gospel calls “Bartimaeus”, asks, “Who is coming?” He’s told only, “Jesus of Nazareth.” But then the blind man reveals his sight, seeing even what our Lord’s disciples could not see. And the blind man will not be hushed. He cries out, not for alms, but for mercy: “Son of David, have mercy on me!” He cries out, not just to some rabbi or miracle worker, but the Son of David, the One who goes to Jerusalem as a sacrifice, the One who rules as king by grace and mercy.

Our Lord hears the cries of all who are distressed. He hears the cries of this blind man. He commands that the blind man be brought to Him. Then He asks him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” The blind man gives the obvious answer, “Lord, let me recover my sight.” “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.” The now-seeing man follows along to Jerusalem, glorifying God.

But here is what we are usually blind to: If the blind man gains his sight, he loses his begging of others, he loses his charity from strangers, he loses his sympathy from all – in short, he loses his entire way of life. It’s easy for us, of course, to realize that life with sight is better than blindness, but we’re on the other side of it. The blind man has a pretty good thing going, as far as he knows. Why is he willing to risk it?

Socrates’ most famous writing is the allegory of the cave. In it, a group of people who have lived chained to the wall of a cave all of their lives, face the blank cave wall. These people watch shadows projected on the wall by things passing in front of a fire behind them. They never see real things. They only see the shadows, and so they think the shadows are reality. Socrates goes on to explain that the philosopher is like a prisoner who has been freed from the cave. Through his journey out of the cave, he has learned that the shadows on the wall are not reality, rather they are only a projection of what’s real. But when he goes back to tell the other prisoners, they don’t believe him. In fact, they kill him for telling them the truth. The point is this: People don’t like having their worldview changed.

Socrates is on to something. Blindness can be comfortable, no? But perhaps that’s why Jesus asks the blind man what he wants. He wants the blind man to know what he’s in for.

It's not at all unlike when we ask the recipient during the Baptismal rite: "Do you wish to be baptized?"

Why do we ask this question? Why else would they be here? Because baptism takes you out of the cave, and you can never go back. Baptism made you the devil's life-long enemy. You can no longer sit by the side of the road and spectate. You're on the front lines of the battle against sin. You follow on the dark and bloody path to Jerusalem. Our Lord said it this way: "Pick up your cross and follow Me." "Come, die with Me, that you may live with Me."

As noted earlier, the blind man sees more clearly than the disciples. He recognizes the way of life through death. But the disciples follow our Lord along the road with their feet, while their hearts are not in it. They are still attached to the world. But who isn't? They wanted a miracle worker—not a sacrifice. They wanted a teacher who would blow their minds with secret wisdom—not a dying Messiah. The blind man recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as the long-foretold Son of David. He sees while they are blind. He knows the cost (losing the begging, the sympathy, and his whole way of living). But he also sees the worth. So he gives up his life, and everything that he has known. He follows Jesus to the gallows of Jerusalem, glorifying God.

What does this all have to do with us? We mourn for our sins. Have we not been selfish, greedy, impatient, angry, lustful, and full of pride? Have we not hurt ourselves and our loved ones? Have we not failed to love and serve our neighbors? Have we not been too attached to the world? Have we not been too afraid to leave behind the pleasures of the flesh? Repent and set your face toward Jerusalem. Ash Wednesday looms close, just 3 days away. We prepare for this journey because we desperately need a Savior.

In Jerusalem, on the holy cross, is the love of God that would not bend or turn. There is the love that purifies and saves and declares sinners like us to be the saints of God. He rose again for us on the third day. We walk the Lenten path to Jerusalem, not just because there Jesus pays for our sins, but also because Jesus lives.

So be the man no longer blind. Follow your Lord to Jerusalem. Leave behind your sins and your blindness.

Whether we understand all these things as well as the blind man or are as confused and stubborn, uncertain and fearful as the disciples, let us follow to Jerusalem to the holy cross of Jesus Christ. We follow Him, not by some effort of the imagination, but in concrete reality. We partake of His body and blood, the fruit of His cross and gift of His resurrection. We have His Word on our lips. We embrace the individual crosses He would lay on us to bear.

On this upcoming Lenten journey, starting this Ash Wednesday, blind men and disciples alike, follow the Lord wherever He shall lead. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠

*This sermon was taken in large part from "Thy Kingdom Come: Lent and Easter Sermons" by the Rev. D.H. Petersen (pastor, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN)*