

The two sides of the coin
Homily for October 24, 2021
 30th Sunday Ordinary Time

St Augustine wrote:

“misericordia (mercy) and miseria (misery) are two sides of the same coin.”

This phrase is an apt summary of the theme in the Gospel for today where we discover that mercy and misery are two sides of the same coin.

The misery of which St. Augustine’s speaks is on clear display in the blind man, who we know not by his own name, but by the title “Bartimaeus”, which in English is translated “son of Timaeus. He is also a man who had once be able to see but is now blind and wants to see again. Although the English translation quotes him to say:

“Master, let me receive my sight”

the Greek original would be better translated as “let me see again.”

Because he is without sight he is also directionless – the restoration of his vision, we are told, then results in his following Jesus along the way. Here we see expressed a threefold understanding, not only of this man’s misery, but of the misery common to our race when separated from Jesus Christ. He lacks a name, he lacks orientation and he lacks direction. Or to put it a little differently,

- He doesn’t know who he is.
- He doesn’t know where he is.
- And he doesn’t know where he is going.

The biblical narrative from beginning to end addresses these three causes of the misery common to humanity. The reference to this man as the son of Timaeus is true but incomplete. When we only understand our identity in relation to our family of origin, this limits our perspective. It can lead us to conclude that I am nothing more than the results of my DNA and genetics. We can experience a kind of anonymity that depersonalises who we are - especially if being the son of or daughter of our father was marked by neglect, abuse, control and other aspects of the human condition that diminish the innate dignity given to us by God. We see this with Bartimaeus. As he cries out to Jesus the voice of the crowd rebukes him and tries to silence him. The crowd wants to not only silence Bartimaeus but keep him in his place as an anonymous nobody.

Not knowing who we are can affect our understanding where we are. We see this right back in Genesis chapter 3. Here we are told that Adam and Eve having taken his direction from the serpent hides himself from God and so God asks him “Where are you?” This is a question that gets to the heart of what it means to be human. When we are disorientated we do not know where we are. We do not know what our life is about and what we are here for. And so we make it up

as we go along the road of life resulting in great confusion because of a fear that life might be without purpose. Again imagine being blind Bartimaeus, a blind beggar on the road leading from Jericho. He would have felt a certain disorientation. When this happens we then do not know where to go or how to get there. Bartimaeus was in a sense stuck by the side of the road. This is the misery common to the human condition, nameless, purposeless and directionless. But it can also be the time when such miseria can allow us to turn the coin over and discover the Misericordia –that is the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Now I want to pause here for a minute. Do you hear how in the Latin there is a clear association between the words misery and mercy? Remember the word for misery is “miseria” and the word for mercy is misaericodia. The word cordia is a form of the Latin noun for heart. Think about that. The mercy of Jesus is the way he joins his heart to human misery and suffering – not just in some general way but in the particulars of anonymous blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho.

This is what is on display in our Gospel reading. Notice the play on words that is presented here. Bartimaeus is the Son of Timaues and this son cries out the first time:

“Jesus, Son of Dvid, have mercy on me”.

When the crowd tries to silence him, St Mark says he is more insistent and declares

“Son of David, have mercy on me”.

What does this mean? The Son of Timaus knows that his true identity is linked with knowing the true identity of Jesus, the Messiah. For the Jewish People – the Title “Son of David” was synonymous with the title Messiah. And who is the Messiah? The one who has come to join his heart to the suffering of those like this blind beggar. Notice please what the crowd says to the blind man after Jesus calls him:

“Take heart; rise, he is calling you.”

Isn't that lovely? When we know Jesus is joining his heart to our suffering and misery we can then take heart and rise because he is calling us to receive more of his mercy.

For this man to ask for Jesus to have mercy on him means he is asking Jesus to see his true condition. When Jesus has mercy on us, he meets us where we are then invites us to follow him to a place we have never been before.

With this son, Jesus not only wants to restore his sight but even more importantly he wants to restore his identity and invite him to then live his life following Jesus along the way.

What does this mean? I would like to suggest the following application. Here is a man who had lost his way. Remember his request is “to see again.” St Mark wants all of us to understand that as we live life we can all have our vision impaired and even lost because as we live in the world we can so easily become confused as we experience times of misery where we forget who we are, where we are and where we are going.

Such misery can lead us to a place of despair and a rejection of faith where we listen to the crowd and give up. Or it can be the opportunity to renew our faith and more fully cry out “Son of David, have mercy on me”. When we do this we can then take heart and follow Jesus along the way.

When we choose to use our times of suffering as an opportunity to draw closer to Jesus we can then be used by Jesus to join our hearts with the hearts with others who suffer. In other words we become a people who are merciful because we know how much we need mercy. This theme is expressed in our reading from Hebrews this way:

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness;¹

I think these are words that capture succinctly the two sides of the coin. This priest can deal mercifully with the miserable because in his own weakness he has known the mercy of Christ.

It is this kind of church we are called to be in the 21st century. So many today have never known or forgotten who they are, where they are and where they are going. May we in discovering the gift of following the merciful ways of Jesus be a people whose merciful kindness is a an indication that in our misery we have taken heart because of the misericordia of Jesus Christ has come near as he says to us”

“Go on your way, your faith has made you well.”

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Heb 5:1–2). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.