

*Sermon for 25 October 2009
The Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner
Proper 25
Year B
Psalm 34:1-8, (19-22)
Jeremiah 31:7-9
Hebrews 7:23-28
Mark 10:46-52*

'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.'

This world-renown hymn was written by John Newton who was a slave trader.

One night at sea he experienced a violent storm; moments after he left the deck, the crewman who had taken his place was swept overboard. Although he manned the vessel for the remainder of the tempest, he later commented that throughout the tumult he realized his helplessness and concluded that only God's grace saved him. Newton eventually became a minister in the Anglican Church but his was not a Road to Damascus conversion. Newton continued his slave trading but told the sailors under his charge to pray and to treat their human cargo with gentleness and concern. Nevertheless, it would be another thirty+ years before Newton ended his slave trading.

In other words here is a man who has a near death conversion experience and who writes one of the world's most beautiful hymns about being blind and then due to God's grace, able to see himself anew while he still traffics in human life. Like Newton, we cannot see how blind we are - it takes someone outside ourselves to help us see our blind spots. And yet sight can be a blessing and a curse.

Today we read about blind Bartamaeus, a beggar who once had sight. In his sightlessness however, he sees what others cannot see-- Jesus the Messiah, the savior, the Redeemer, the man who will become the Christ.

'Jesus, son of David' he cries out when his friends have said only that Jesus of Nazareth is walking by; 'have mercy on me!' How does Bartamaeus know who Jesus really is? Through his faith, not his sight, he knows.

And once Bartamaeus has received sight again the lesson indicates that he walks with the crowd and Jesus to their next place. Where is that next place? The 11th chapter of Mark begins with Jesus, the disciples and crowd approaching Jerusalem via at the Mount of Olives. Jesus sends two of his disciples, saying, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"

Do you recognize this passage? It is the Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem that ends in Jesus' crucifixion. Is this what Bartamaeus sees now that Jesus has healed him? Was he a witness at the crucifixion? It seems a cruel possibility.

How can we live-- how can we breathe when our spirits feel crushed by seeing? When our human helplessness overwhelms us and we can see only from isolation, through our lens of fear with wariness? Once we have seen something we wish we hadn't, we can't pretend we didn't see it. We can lie to ourselves but it is just a lie, and the image remains to haunt or taunt.

But like Bartamaeus our helplessness can drive us straight into the arms of Christ where we can beg for mercy, for forgiveness, for the strength to continue breathing, for the grace to have faith in God's ability and desire to transform our human failures into glory.

On our last trip to Calcutta, the night before we flew home, Bishop Probal thought it would be a treat for us to go to a new development on the edge of Calcutta to have dinner at an elegant Chinese restaurant. Frankly, by the end of the trip we were all exhausted and would have preferred room service of a coke, potato chips and Twinkies - maybe with a little bourbon thrown in for good measure. But we all dressed up and piled into

the two cars for the hour long trip to the suburbs. Caught in downtown Cal traffic, we were stuck at a red light that has lasted over 8 months. Walking in between the massive streams of traffic was a boy - about 5 or 6 years old, carrying a baby boy above his head, at car window height. The baby had on no diaper or pants, just an orange wool cap and a green and white sweater. The young boy was selling the baby.

At 8 o'clock at night, in a city of 15 million people, a baby was being sold for a few rupee, and it happens every night, over and over. I do not condone the boy's behavior and I cannot condemn it; I can only work towards and pray for a world where children no longer have to sell each other in order to have enough money to eat.

I saw this act of human degradation, and now I have made you witnesses to it because I cannot bear this image alone.

Like you, I have also have witnessed miracles of Christ's transforming love; this past summer, on a hot and sticky day, one of our amazing office volunteers was leaving for the day and as she reached her car in front of church, a young woman approached her, asking if she could use our telephone. She was told to go on into Miller Hall and ask anyone she saw for this favor. The visitor tied her puppy up outside, opened the front door and maneuvered her stroller and 3 year old son through the door. I happened to meet her and guided her to the serenity of the parlor.

Angela dialed her mother and although I tried not to listen, I overheard some of her conversation. Angela's boyfriend and father of her children had gotten drunk and gone berserk, destroying their apartment and beating her; she had two black and blue and purple eyes as well as finger marks on her arms and neck- bruises where she had been brutally grabbed and held. Angela and her children had fled to safety with her grandmother in Brevard and was calling her mother to find out what bits of her possessions might still exist - she was devastated because she had forgotten her babies' photo albums when she fled.

As I talked with her son and served them cold water, I was so grateful to you, the people of St. Philip's, who had contributed to create the parlor, to you who had furnished it with elegant furniture that honored our guest, to you who continue year after year to support the church making the cool of the air conditioner and the calm lighting possible. That day St. Philip's was entertaining angels - literally - and Angela and her children were given 20 minutes of amnesty from her life of painful chaos. As she left St. Philip's another parishioner met her at the door and blessed her with hospitable kindness and a gift of money that made it possible for Angela to take her children on a special summer outing.

All the past and present saints of St. Philip's were joining with the Holy Spirit to love this lost and beaten refugee and I know God was present.

Antoine de St. Expury wrote: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

Bartamaeus sees with his heart - he knows in that way of faithful people that Jesus is the Messiah. God's grace transforms Bartamaeus' darkness of not seeing into the light of true knowledge - of faith. And what is faith but trusting in God? Trusting when in the face of reason we should not. Trusting that God can and will transform our weaknesses into glory even when we are filled with shame and a sense of unworthiness. Trusting that God can and will take an innocent child, raised like the host at the Eucharistic banquet feast, and turn his misery and confusion into hearts on fire for human rights and sacred dignity.

Jesus asks Bartamaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" He asks the question not of the Mayor of Jericho or the great priests or the noblemen but of the town beggar who lives by the side of the road, dependent on others for his well-being, his safety, his food, his dignity. This is great news for us - sinners in one another's sight - because it means we too, at our lowest depths of misery, can have our deepest, most fervent prayers answered.

What do we want from Jesus the Christ? At the most basic level we want economic security. We want good health, protection from harm for our selves and our family. Everyone wants these temporary and ordinary needs to be met, and everyone has a right to have them met. Children in slums all over the world have the right not to be sold into slavery tonight; they have a right to nutritious food, healthy parents and equal access to education, decent housing and to be *safe—to be children*. Unfortunately they are being failed.

In less than six years, in 2015, the world hopes to achieve the Millennium Development Goals; now we find ourselves mired in an economic crisis that is unprecedented in its severity and global dimensions. In 2009, an estimated 55m to 90 million more people will be living in extreme poverty - on less than \$1.25/day- than before the world conditions that coalesced in the MDGs. The encouraging trend in the eradication of hunger since the early 1990s was reversed in 2008, largely due to higher food prices. The prevalence of hunger in the developing regions is now on the rise, from 16 per cent in 2006 to 17 per cent in 2008.

Madeleine L'Engle, the Episcopal author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and dozens of other books stated: “We have much to be judged on when He comes, slums and battlefields and insane asylums, but these are the symptoms of our illness and the result of our failures in love.”

We who have much are failing to see who is our neighbor. We are not understanding that if one of us is sold into slavery then we are all enslaved because God does not distinguish between Greek and Jew, male and female, light and dark. We are all his children and therefore sisters and brothers in the most real grace-filled way.

We see with our eyes and we are changed. We see with our hearts and are transformed. Overfed or starving, slave or free we are all invited to see the world as Christ sees it, full of God's glory and hope and possibility. It takes courage - heart - to

follow Jesus to Jerusalem to witness the worst of life. But it is only by being faithful witnesses to the crucifixion that we can share the luminous experience of resurrection. Amen.