

## **Back in the Day**

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
October 29, 2006

*Job 42: 1-6, 10-17; Ps. 34; Heb. 7: 23-28; Mark 10: 46-52*

This has nothing to do with my sermon, but I want you to know about it. The annual convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts was held here in Trinity Church this weekend. The convention, some 800 deputies plus visitors, observers, exhibitors filled our spaces – this sanctuary, the undercroft, the first floor of the parish house. Our building of itself offered welcome and hospitality. But only because of the people I want to praise and thank – before you. The risk in doing this is that I will leave someone out; I apologize if I inadvertently do so. I name with gratitude the members of our altar guild ministry, our lay liturgists, our ushers, our organist choir director, our college age ministry, known as AND... A New Day; our greeters, our 20s and 30s, known as CommonGround, our youth who serve the diocesan youth counsel and most especially, our facilities staff, our administrative staff and our Associate for Worship and Pastoral Care, who together coordinated absolutely everything for 800 plus people for two long days not counting late night set-up on Thursday and take-down last evening to make our spaces ready for today. Thanks be to God for them all. I am astonished any of them are still standing. Let's applaud them all.

I also want to say that after sitting in our pews for the better part of two days, I promise on a stack of Bibles to be ruthlessly vigilant about the length of my sermons. Philips Brooks may have been a giant of a man, but the members of congregation for whom these pews were designed must have been uniformly short. We can be grateful we are Episcopalians who can break up the sitting with standing, kneeling and walking to and from the altar.

+++

“Back in the day,” is a colloquialism we frequently hear in our household. As far as I can tell it can be used to reference anything that has happened in the world between the dawn of Creation and the birth date of the person using the expression. I usually hear “back in the day”, when a discovery has been made about my own personal ancient history. For example, “You mean, back in the day you didn't have cell phones?” But it can also be employed with reference to general ancient history. For example in a dinner table conversation about what folks are studying, “Back in the day, Vasco Da Gama sailed from Lisbon, Portugal, around Africa to Calcutta, India. So, I infer, ancient Biblical history is fair game. For example, “Back in the day Jericho was conquered by Joshua, as the Israelites entered the land that God had promised them.”

On this day we hear a story from Mark's account of Jesus' ministry that occurs in Jericho. Back in Jesus' day, Jericho was the site of Herod's summer palace, elaborate

new summer palace. In the region of the palace Jericho had seen aggressive urban redevelopment and restoration. Gentrification. It was a showplace neighborhood, where wealthy landowners, merchants and courtiers lived, worked and played. One commentator writes, "...nowhere else in Israel do such extremes of wealth and poverty live side by side." For Jericho was home to impoverished laborers, slaves and beggars. [The problems of the city span the ages, don't they? These aren't simply "back in the day" issues. One could substitute the words, Copley Square for Jericho, change a couple of words and the general description would fit our own day. How blessed we are to be a parish community that seeks to serve the needs of the city! And how much work there is to do!]

In the story Jesus hears and heeds the plea of a blind beggar, sitting by the side of the road Jesus takes on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem. The man is one of hordes of beggars, who camp out near the gates of the city in the hope that someone will throw down onto the cloaks they spread out next to them, the same cloaks they must wrap around themselves for warmth, someone will throw down a coin or some food. Jesus heals the man of his physical, bodily blindness, saying, "Go, your faith has made you well." The man jumps up, leaving his cloak, his means of support and his source of bodily warmth, leaving his old life and follows Jesus, becomes a disciple, on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross.

I note here that whereas you and I might want to focus our attention on the healing that occurred back in the day, Mark wants us to focus on the faith of the man. He says it is the man's faith that Jesus is God come near that enables Jesus to heal him. His faith enables Jesus to give him recognition, restore him to wholeness and give him new purpose.

Like Job – back in his day, about whom we also hear this morning/evening – the man somehow has come to know in the very core of his being that he needs God come near to him in Jesus and that God come near to him is all sufficient. He is moved to call out, "Have mercy on me." He may not have sight, but he has insight, faith that in Jesus God is near, and it is that insight, that faith, according to Mark, that allows Jesus to heal him. He is as spread out before Jesus as the cloaks of the beggars are spread out on the ground. Open and yearning for whatever Jesus has to give. He puts up no barriers to the healing power of God in Jesus. For Mark he is the model for us.

To help us understand why Mark draws the contrast between him and James and John, about whom we heard last week. The passage about their demand of Jesus immediately precedes the passage we hear today. They are two of Jesus' closest and dearest disciples, members of his inner circle. And they presume upon the relationship. They tell Jesus, "Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask of you." He replies, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Well, they want him to reserve for them the two highest positions of honor, one on his left, one on his right, when he comes into his glory. They want assurance that they, not others of the disciples will occupy those seats of power and acclaim. They are as blind in their being as the blind beggar is in his eyes alone. He knows what he is asking. They have no insight into what they are asking. Do they really

want to be crucified one on his left one on his right? If Jesus' glory is the cross, that's what they are asking. Do you think they see that they have taken on the role of the Satan in the account of Jesus' temptations, demanding of him that he arrogate to himself what only God can give? Do you think they would say they have earned what they ask of him? I do. That's the trap.

When we start believing we are entitled in God's economy, we have gone way off track. Contrast them to Bartimaeus who cried out to Jesus, because he knew only through the mercy and grace of God would he receive anything at all. When we draw the contrast, we have arrived at the heart of this passage, indeed the heart of the gospel. It is only through the mercy and grace of God come near in Jesus that we can receive anything at all, anything that matters, that is. All things come of thee, O Lord, is a true statement.

My late friend, Arthur McNulty, once wrote, "We can come to God only as beggars, entreating mercy in our helplessness, not making demands on the basis of our perceived merit. We can never receive assurance of glory or security; all we can ask is the ability to see with more clarity."

Mark hopes we will see that our plea each day needs be, "Have mercy on me." Our posture before God needs be as spread out and open as the cloaks of the beggars were spread out on the ground back in the day. Our desire needs be for healing, not power or acclaim, healing by God come near in Jesus, healing so that we too might see with clarity who we are and who we are called to be – disciples. Back in the day Jesus gave Bartimaeus three things we all need: recognition, wholeness or healing and purpose. He wants to do the same for us in our own day. He wants us to be open to the healing power of his love. He wants us to help one another do that. Amen.