



**Nothing to Lose**  
**Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 10: 46-52**  
**Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 24, 2021)**

“If you blink, you may miss it.” How many times have we referred to small Mid-Western towns that way? It surely feels that way as we read today’s gospel from Mark. It tells us that Jesus and his entourage come to Jericho on his way to Jerusalem and then leave with a larger crowd. The short reference makes us think that he is just coming through: he has no intention of sticking around. And yet, he is forced to slow down. As is often the case, Jesus is in no hurry. He is here for people and is totally focused on those in need.

Jericho is about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem near the Jordan River in modern day West Bank. It’s known as one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. It’s also the first city that the Israelites conquered when they arrived in Canaan after their escape from Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

In Jesus’ day Jericho was a flourishing town, host to a considerable amount of trade and celebrated for the palm trees that adorned the surrounding plain.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Herod the Great built his winter palace in town because of its warm climate and freshwater springs. Since Jericho catered to the rich and powerful, homeless beggars often lined the roads in and out of town because it was a good place to plead for a handout.

While Matthew tells us that two blind beggars ask Jesus to restore their sight, in both Luke and Mark there is only one blind man, and Mark tells us that his name is Bartimaeus. As Jesus comes by, he yells, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Bartimaeus is neither concerned about making a scene nor is he afraid of assigning to Jesus the political title of “Son of David”, meaning the legitimate shepherd king of Israel. In the Bible, we find repeated political references in opposition to the elite’s abuses and oppression. If it was dangerous to be seen with a prophet it was even more so to acknowledge anyone to be king other than Caesar. Was that the reason why they tried to hush the blind man? Life in the kingdom is not for the faint of heart.

It’s also in Jericho that Jesus encounters Zacchaeus.<sup>3</sup> The story occurs only in the gospel of Luke. Luke tells us that he is a tax collector who enriched himself by abusing his position and defrauding taxpayers. He, just like everybody else in the crowd accompanying Jesus, wants to have a glimpse of the miracle worker.

Being too short to see above the crowd, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree. That’s when Jesus looks at him, calls him out of the tree and invites himself over for dinner. Zacchaeus is so moved that he commits his life to God and gives away his possessions to the poor and return four times over what he has defrauded. Obviously, we hear of the people’s complain as Jesus spends time

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua 6

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 34:3

<sup>3</sup> Luke 19

with Zacchaeus. Why would he want to associate himself with such a despicable man? How can he be a man of God and a prophet and not know that this man is a lowlife?

In any event, as soon as Bartimaeus hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he calls him "son of David," a title that reminds one of the vocation of the shepherd king, the person responsible to care for God's flock. He affirms Jesus' place in the salvation history of his people. "This is the only passage in which the title "son of David" appears in Mark, and it's worth noting that Jesus does not silence him. Mark's Jesus, who has been so secretive about his identity, not only allows Bartimaeus to refer to him this way but rewards him with sight."<sup>4</sup>

As Mark recalls the event, Bartimaeus keeps calling out to Jesus. Over and over again, he asks for mercy, using the Greek word we use when we sing "Kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy." He is not seeking sympathy nor is he asking for a handout or to be taken across the street. He goes big: he calls for mercy, an urgent appeal to one's heart to act.

Jesus stops. He hears the desperation. He chooses to be in solidarity with him. After Jesus quiets the crowd who tries to silence the man, he restores Bartimaeus' dignity and acknowledges his agency. It's evident that he is a blind man, but Jesus does not assume he knows what Bartimaeus wants: Jesus asks the man what it is that he can do for him.

It's at this time that Bartimaeus calls Jesus rabbouni/master, recognizing him as the highest-ranking teacher one could find. He, a blind person, a beggar, a man excluded from a fuller life and considered a weight to society, finds the courage to shout Jesus' name. In the eyes of the world, he lives an unproductive and parasitic life; he, a worm and not man, is unseen and unwanted. He is used to beg for alms to make it one more day, can he really aim for grace to make it through eternity?

All we know is that Bartimaeus asks to be able to see again but is it possible that he wants more than his eyesight to be restored? Is it possible that he wants to be seen, really seen, as a human being, a child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made? Is it possible that he seeks affirmation and acknowledgment by Jesus, that he may be deemed worthy of love and consideration? Is it possible that, once he has come out and made himself vulnerable, he is welcomed and included and cherished within a new circle of friends and not ridiculed for having dared?

His faith is bold; he trusts God and so, against all odds and over the voices of those who try to silence him, he asks, he begs for an audience. And he wins, because with Jesus one always wins.

Jesus gets it and calls him closer. Bartimaeus jumps on his feet and throws his cloak away, the only possession and security he has, he expects his life will change for the better: he is in the presence of Jesus now, what does he need the cloak for?

Jesus is quick to acknowledge Bartimaeus' faith. He restores his sight to see deeply and then he sends him on his way. What we witness to now is another act of humility on Jesus' part: Jesus advances no pretenses and simply let's him go, applauding his faith. But Bartimaeus is so elated with joy and gratitude that he wastes no time in following Jesus. He wants to be a disciple and follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, ready to commit to the master who has made such a huge difference in his life. Where else can he go now that he has met Jesus? He owes Jesus not only his sight but his very life; he knows his heart belongs to Jesus. He knows whose he is.

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<sup>4</sup>Professor Timothy Adkins-Jones, [Lectionary column for October 24, Ordinary 30B \(Mark 10:46-52\)](http://christiancentury.org) ([christiancentury.org](http://christiancentury.org))

Do we have requests of Jesus? Does our faith sight need to be restored? Are we really looking at the world with eyes of faith? Do we expect a change in our life for knowing Jesus? It is possible to get complacent and accustomed to the way life is, not expecting our faith in God to make any difference and refraining from presenting to God our needs.

I'm reminded of the time a farming community was under much stress because of the extended summer drought. The pastor then scheduled a town convocation for prayer and encouraged her church members to spread the word. On the day designated for prayer, she observed the people as they approached the meeting place. As the last one finally reached the assembly, the pastor expressed her perplexity: "We are gathered for prayer to ask God to send the rain, but none of you showed up with an umbrella."

Do we expect miracles? Do we expect God to show up and make a difference in our life? What's our cloak, our possession and security we hold on so tightly? Are we ready to throw off our cloak and fully trust that God has something better in store for us? Once again, the gospel invites us to make a life-changing decision for Jesus. Jesus calls us, how are we going to respond?

During that short stay in Jericho, life took a turn for the better for two totally opposite people: a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, and a rich tax collector, Zacchaeus. Either man had nothing to lose: why not take a chance with Jesus? Life has not been fair to Bartimaeus, so it is quite understandable that he turns to the Son of David. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, honestly acknowledges his faults and is ready to get his guilt off his chest: Jesus' presence is liberating.

May our body, our mind, and our soul be healed and restored. May we find the courage to throw off our cloak and follow Jesus. Amen.