

Discipleship & Theological Education

On Mark 10.46-52

By Pablo A. Jiménez

Miracle stories are about God's mercy and power. However, Mark 10.46-52 is much more than a miracle story; it is a story about discipleship. We know it because twice we find the word "road" or "way" (Gk. "hodos", vv. 46 & 52) and we also find the verb "to follow" (Gk. "akoluthēō") which in the Gospel of Mark are the hallmarks of discipleship: *following Jesus on the Way*.

This is also the last story before Jesus' "Triumphal Entrance" to Jerusalem. Jesus goes into Jerusalem in order to face the cross. *Therefore, this is a key text for understanding Mark's view on discipleship.*

As Jesus reaches the town of Jericho he finds that, on the roadside of that tourist town, there are people who are willingly giving wealthy people the opportunity to help them. In Judaism, to give to the poor is a "mitzvah," it's a good deed. So, in Jewish Rabbinical theology, beggars were important because they allowed you to have "mitzvot", good deeds that would account for salvation. This explains why Jesus finds on the roadside a long row of beggars with various ailments.

But there is one beggar called Bartimaeus. It has always puzzled me that the text says "Bartimaeus (which means "son of Timaeus")." (v. 46) "Bar" means "the son of." Having grown up in the Caribbean, I know by experience that in poor communities people who had ailments were treated differently. Usually, they were not addressed by their proper names but by nicknames based on their ailments or on their family relations. This man probably had another name, but people just called him "the son of Timaeus" because he was "invisible" to the community. He was considered "the other."

Bartimaeus learns that Jesus is coming his way. By this time Jesus' fame has grown and he walks surrounded by a large entourage of people. It is impossible to miss him. So, Bartimaeus hears that Jesus is coming and he--who is sitting by "the way"--begins to cry out: "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Now, his theology is faulty. Yes, Jesus is "Son of David", but not necessarily in the militaristic way many expected during the First Century. Bartimaeus does not call Jesus "the Christ" nor "the Messiah." He has an inkling of who Jesus is, but he needs better theology in order to fully understand his divine identity.

Mark 10.46-52 points to another important aspect of discipleship, namely, how the disciples treated "the other." Jesus' closest followers go to the blind man and "rebuke" him. (v. 48) Here Mark employs the Greek verb "epitimaō", which is used elsewhere in the Gospel to describe the actions of rebuking unclean spirits and casting out demons. (Mark 1.25, 4.39, 9.25) Are the disciples treating Bartimaeus as demonic? Are they looking down on him? Were they influenced by Rabbinical Theology, according to which an ailment is a sure sign of sin and, therefore, a valid reason for exclusion?

In any case, *the disciples do not give Bartimaeus access to Jesus*. They block Bartimaeus access to Jesus. I think that this was a test. Jesus gave an "exam" to his disciples. Have they learned anything? Have they understood Jesus' mission?

If you read Mark you will soon realize that no, they had not understood Jesus. For example, earlier in chapter 10 the disciples are bickering, debating about who was going to be "greater" in the kingdom. So, Jesus gave them a test, and they failed it when they said to the beggar: "There is no grace for you."

- You are too poor.
- You are too sick.
- You may even be demonic.
- You are "the other."
- We rebuked you, in Jesus' name!

But Jesus had other plans. He called his disciples and told them to go and bring the blind man to him. I imagine that this was not the most comfortable moment for the disciples. Having "crow" as the main dish for dinner is never comfortable!

Following Jesus' instructions, the disciples return to the same man that they had previously rejected, excluded and demonized. They say to him: "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." (v. 49) Notice how the role of the disciples has changed. Instead of *blocking* access, now they are *giving access* to Jesus!

In response, Bartimaeus does two things that clearly illustrate his enthusiasm. First of all, he throws away his robe (v. 50,) which he was probably using to catch the coins tossed at him. I imagine the robe flying through the air, the coins falling to the floor, and the other beggars fighting for the easy money.

Bartimaeus jumps to his feet and goes to Jesus, who proceeds to give him another test, asking "What do you want me to do for you?" (v. 51) The beggar responds: "Rabbi, I want to see" (literally, "to see again, Gk. "anablepö".) Therefore, the man in need asks for the gift of vision.

Remember that the disciples didn't understand fully who Jesus was. Why? Because they lacked vision. Bartimaeus asks for vision and he receives it. And his vision, in many ways, was clearer than the disciples' vision.

Jesus tells the healed man that he could leave. Bartimaeus could go back home. He could go back to his family, get a job, and become part of the community again. But this man chooses another path. He decides "to follow Jesus on the way". (v. 52) That is, on the way to the cross.

Theological education is just a higher level of discipleship. Evangelism, Christian education, spiritual formation and theological education are on a continuum. In many ways, theological education begins the day that someone tell us: "Jesus is LORD." In this sense, everything we do at a theological school, even at the doctoral level, is just a form of Christian discipleship.

Those of us engaged in theological education have the opportunity to be in a role similar to Jesus' disciples in this text: We can grant others access to Jesus.

In order to fulfill this role faithfully, we must remember who Jesus is calling:

They may be people with faulty theology.

They may be people with problematic backgrounds.

They may be people totally different to us.

But they are crying out for Jesus. We have the wonderful opportunity of receiving them and of discipling them. And they will have the wonderful opportunity to suffer for Jesus, walking along him on the way to the cross.

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In Christ,

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