

# Sunday Homily

## 30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

24 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

"What do you want me to do for you?"

### Illustration

One of the most loved spiritual classics of the Russian Orthodox Church is called *The Way of a Pilgrim*. It purports to be the spiritual autobiography of a Russian peasant who lived in the middle of the nineteenth century. The author is not so much a pilgrim journeying to holy places as a wanderer over the face of the earth.

In Russian spirituality such a mixture of wandering and simplicity of life is revered because it reflects the early Christian ideals of spiritual freedom and detachment from the world. The choice of such a simple figure as the Pilgrim was intended to speak to all that was important to the Russian soul. He meets all sorts of characters on his journey, and his tale contrasts the Gospel life lived by these different members of society with the surrounding scenes of cruelty and violence, which are unsparingly portrayed as well. The Pilgrim's avowed aim is to expound the "Jesus Prayer" – "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" – as the source of spirituality for lay people as they go about their lives. His story also reveals the reverence with which he, the wandering peasant, is received by the true believers. The one who seems to have nothing is recognised as the one who is closest to the truths of Christian life and discipleship.

### Gospel Teaching

During the Gospel readings of recent Sundays we have seen the disciples of Jesus failing to understand the true nature of discipleship. First the disciples could not comprehend Jesus' prophecy of his passion; then there was the young man who could not let go of his possessions; then the sons of Zebedee were eager to claim positions of power at Jesus' right hand.

After this catalogue of misunderstandings, Mark gives us an outstanding example of true discipleship. It is Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. Bartimaeus recognises Jesus for who he is, the Son of David, and, despite the crowd's attempts to put him off, he shouts out to him for mercy. Jesus stops and calls him to him. Bartimaeus throws off his beggar's cloak, his means of livelihood, the only thing he has in the world, and jumps up to go to Jesus. Jesus asks him the same question he has just asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" The sons of Zebedee had asked him for positions of power. Bartimaeus asks for the restoration of his sight. The true disciple asks to see clearly and knows that he needs the power of the master to be able to do this.

Jesus acknowledges this plea as the sign of Bartimaeus' faith, the faith he has been preaching as the essential prerequisite for healing and insight into the truth. With his sight restored, Bartimaeus completes the pattern of discipleship. He follows Jesus along the road to Jerusalem. In other words, he takes up the way of life revealed by Jesus, which will lead to suffering and death. The chapter ends, and in the first line of the next chapter Jesus begins his approach to Jerusalem.

## Application

One of the errors the Church has always resisted is that of Gnosticism, the claim that closeness to Christ depends on being a member of an elite group with special knowledge. The first step in discipleship is that of not knowing, the simplicity expressed by Bartimaeus the blind beggar, or the homelessness of the wanderer. True disciples lay no claim to being special. But something special happens to them through their encounter with Jesus.

The next step is that we place ourselves under his healing power. Sometimes, like Bartimaeus, we have to fling off even the little we have, our cloaks, our means of livelihood, what offers us fame and fortune in the world. But, in the act of healing, the great gift we receive is that of freedom. We are no longer bound by the burden of worldly expectations. Rather we are freed to follow Jesus in his dance along the road, a road of constant challenges.

The question Jesus continues to ask on the journey is the one he put to Bartimaeus: "What do you want me to do for you?" At times we can persecute ourselves with guilt or anxiety because we feel we are not doing enough for Jesus. Once again we have it the wrong way round. Jesus wants to know what he can do for us. As we answer the question, we hopefully make the same response as Bartimaeus and ask that we too may see.