

Pentecost XXI
October 29, 2006
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Va
The Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.

Mark 10:46-52

Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

A few weeks ago in a sermon I mentioned that I have rejoined a gym and have been going regularly. I debated saying that in a sermon because I knew that I'd have hundreds of people wanting to know if I am still at it and I couldn't cheat easily. I like to cheat! Actually that was one reason I mentioned it...you can help to keep me on track and you have. You'll be pleased to know that I am still at it.

I had an interesting encounter this past week that made me glad I have been going to the gym. I was visiting someone at the Veteran's Hospital. I was walking across the parking lot and there were these two older people by a pick-up truck. One was in a wheel chair and the other was standing beside a new, fully loaded and very heavy...I am talking 400 pounds of heavy...motorized wheel chair. They needed to get the chair into the back of the pick-up truck. A woman had already stopped, she was a very able person...but that woman and the older man weren't going to get the chair into the truck. So I stopped. The woman looked at me and said, "Are you strong?" And I replied, "You bet." So, the three of us hoisted the wheel chair into the back of the truck. I am happy to report that my time at the gym paid off and I got to do a mitzvah...a good deed.

My days are often filled with interesting encounters. I am sure yours are too. Have you ever been out on the street and someone asked you, "Have you been saved?" It helps to be in good spiritual shape to take that one on!

Now, in my experience the question really means, "When you die, are you going to spend an eternity up there some where eating bonbons or are you going to hell." And, depending on who is asking the question, they have the sure fire program to get you there.

I recently had some Mormon missionaries at my door at home. I told them how much I admired their dedication. And I do. Do you know they go out for two years at the time to spread the word. They finance this themselves. Can you imagine what we would be like with that kind of drive?

Even though I disagree with them, I do admire the commitment. At any rate, they told me how I need to believe so that when I die I can become a god and rule over my own world. I told them, that I was a traditional Christian, and quite firm in my faith...and asked them if **they** didn't want to change. It was interesting exchange, to say the least. And it was not unlike other conversations I've had with people, lots of Christians who ask me, "Are you saved." It always seems to come down to guaranteeing a good place in the afterlife, in another world disconnected from this one.

In the ancient Jewish world in which Jesus lived, the question of salvation had a very different meaning. If you had asked any Jew alive in Jesus' day the question "Have you been saved?" they would have answered, incredulously... "Open your eyes! Of course we haven't been saved. The Romans occupy us. Our religious leaders are either bent on violence or weak compromisers. Death and disease reigns. Salvation has not come." Salvation had to do primarily with the life of this world, with Israel receiving justice and becoming a "light to the nations."

Now, the belief did grow up that those who had died prior to the salvation of Israel would have a part in it. They would be resurrected so that they could participate in that great event, the event to which all history was leading. So in the meantime the spirits of the dead rested, awaiting resurrection. But that resting state was not the main event.

So, if we want to be biblically sound, the question “Are you saved”, given our own cultural context, can be misleading. The question really needs to be, “Are you a part of the salvation of this world, are you part of God’s transforming love, his peace, his justice or are you working against it?” As Christians, we believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the One anointed by God to bring healing...salvation...to this broken world. This is what it means to call Jesus Lord, Savior, Messiah.

The stories of the Gospels, of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are stories which tell us that with Jesus, God’s salvation is dawning. In him, the world is being made new. Jesus showed that this was true in a variety of ways. He taught the people...using parables often...which didn’t spoon feed couch potatoes information...but which caused people to stand up and to think. He forgave sins which caused some to accuse him of blasphemy. He gathered all kinds of people together. He engaged in prophetic actions, such as when he drove the money changers out of the temple. And...he healed people. We hear one of those stories of healing in the gospel for today.

Now I know that there are people who say that stories of healings are false. People say, “You can’t expect people of the 21st century to believe such things.” However, I would argue, along with numerous scholars, that if there is one thing we can say for certain about contemporaneous reports of Jesus, it is that he was a healer. I don’t think they all could have been wrong or deluded. I don’t think they were all liars. Rather, I think we have to be willing to see a world where things are not simple, predictable, controlled.

In the healings of Jesus “...we are invited to see...a dimension of our world which is normally hidden, which had indeed died, but which Jesus brings to new life...he is striding the garden, putting things to rights...It is in our thinking, our imagining, our praying as well as in our bodily health that we are invited to come, like the frantic crowds, (like blind Bartimaeus) and touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, looking for salvation.”¹

Jesus did not heal all or even most of the people in his day. His healings were visual proclamations that God’s salvation was breaking into history in his ministry. Jesus was not running a hospital. That was not his mission. But his healings showed what the final destination of this world will be... a world where death and disease are no more.

And what about us today? Obviously, we don’t share the power that Jesus had, but we do pray for healing. We do see death and disease as the enemy. Life is worth fighting for. We should never acquiesce and accept death easily. We pray for healing so that we may continue to take our place in active ministry in this world. We bring our deepest desires to God and God hears us. We may not always get the results we want when we want them, but God hears.

As a 20th Century Rabbi has said, “... *the accumulated testimony of humanity should make us hesitant to deny the effectiveness of prayer (to bring changes to this world, however), we need not gauge the value of prayer by external changes which it may bring about. ‘The answer to the prayer,’ ... ‘may be in the prayer’...*”²

That is certainly true. What is also certainly true is that in Jesus a new creation has begun. Salvation has begun. It is a salvation grounded in this world and looks forward to this world’s perfection. It is a salvation from which the faithful cannot be separated even by death. This is good news. I stake my life on it. Amen.

¹ MT Wright, Mark for Everyone (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2004) page 84.

² From **Judaism: A Way of Life** by S. S. Cohon (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), page 334ff