

BLIND BARTIMAEUS OF JERICHO
Lord Have Mercy

January 23, 2011
14th Sunday of Luke
Revision C

GOSPEL: Luke 18:35-43

In the West, today's Gospel lesson is also used in the weeks preceding Easter on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

GOSPEL LESSON: Luke 18:35-43 – Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho

The healing of a blind man is covered at two other occasions in the Orthodox lectionary: The man born blind (John 9) on the 6th Sunday of Pascha and the two blind men of Galilee (Matthew 9:27-35) on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost. In each case, including today's Gospel, a recurring theme is that some people who are physically blind have spiritual insight and that some who have good physical eyesight are completely blind to spiritual things. As John Chrysostom (4th Century) said, "Let us listen to these blind men, who were better than many that see" (Homily LXVI on Matthew 20).

Whereas today's Gospel took place in the Spring of 30 AD just before Holy Week, the man born blind was healed the previous Autumn and the two blind men of Galilee were healed a year before that. All of these have Messianic implications for those who have eyes to see it. Referring to the coming of the Messiah, Isaiah wrote: "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped" (Isaiah 35:5; see also Isaiah 29:18, 42:7).

The context of today's Gospel lesson is the final journey to Jerusalem, 30 AD. Jesus announced to the Twelve that they were going to Jerusalem and that Jesus would be delivered to the Gentiles, mocked, insulted, spit on, scourged and killed. And He would rise on the third day. But this was hidden from them and they understood nothing (Luke 18:31-34).

As they passed by Jericho, they met a blind man who was begging. In the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, some additional details are given. In Mark 10:46-52, the blind man was named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. In Matthew 20:29-34, Bartimaeus had a friend with him who was also blind. Together they continuously cried out, "Lord have mercy!" and neither the crowd nor the disciples could shut them up until Jesus responded to their request. Following his healing, Bartimaeus glorified God and so did all the people.

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Bartimaeus Teaches Us

Cyril of Alexandria (4th-5th Century) comments on the Faith of Bartimaeus by examining his use of the term Son of David. He stated that the blind men had some amazing insight into the identity of Christ. “In what character then do they address to Him their prayer? Is it as to a mere man, according to the babbling of the Jews, who tried to stone Him with stones, saying in their utter folly, ‘for a good work we stone You not, but for blasphemy; because that You being a man make Yourself God’? (John 10:33). But must not the blind men have understood that the sight of the blind cannot be restored by human means, but requires, on the contrary, a divine power, and an authority such as God only possesses? For with God nothing whatsoever is impossible. The blind men drew near to Him, therefore, as to the Omnipotent God; but how then did they call Him the Son of David? What therefore can one answer to this? The following is perhaps, as I think the explanation. As they had been brought up in Judaism, and were by birth of that race, the predictions contained in the Law and the Holy Prophets concerning Christ of course had not escaped their knowledge. They had heard them chant that passage in the book of the Psalms: ‘the Lord has sworn the truth unto David, and will not reject it, that of the fruit of Your loins will I set upon Your throne’ (Psalm 131:11). They knew also that the blessed Prophet Isaiah had said, ‘And there shall spring forth a shoot from the root of Jesse, and from his root shall a flower grow up (Isaiah 9:1). And again this as well: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son, and they shall call His Name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us’ (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23). As ones, therefore, who already believed that the Word, being God, had of His Own Will submitted to be born in the flesh of the holy virgin, they drew near to Him as unto God, and said, ‘Have mercy upon me, Son of David (v.38). For Christ bears witness that this was their state of mind in offering their supplication, by saying unto them, ‘Your faith has saved you’ (v.42).

Cyril also pointed out that Bartimaeus:

- Referred to Jesus as Lord as well as Son of David (v.41)
- Asked Him to perform an act only God could do (v.41)
- Confessed his faith in spite of many rebukes (v.39)
- Glorified God following his healing (v.43).

Chrysostom pointed out that Christ did not ask the blind men, “Do you believe?” as He had done with many others (e.g. Mark 5:36, 9:23, 11:22-24, John 11:40). Because their cry and their coming to Him was sufficient to make that obvious (Homily LXVI on Matthew 20). From this, Cyril concludes: “Understand from this, my beloved, that faith sets us also in Christ’s presence, and so brings us unto God, as for us to be even counted worthy of His words. For when the blind men were brought to Him, He asked him, “What do you want Me to do for you?” (v.41). This is an important question in that it directs us to what is our real desire. Do we just want something physical or does our desire go beyond that to true spiritual insight? Do I really want to be free of being enslaved to the passions or do I really like the passions and just want something temporary?

Cyril referred to Bartimaeus as being freed from a double blindness: first from the blindness of his eyes, and second from a blindness of heart and mind (Commentary on Luke, Chapter 18). The vision of his heart was infectious also in that it caused “all the people when

they saw it, to give praise to God” (v.43). Thus even the people that had rebuked Bartimaeus now began to see spiritually themselves. This happens to us also: as we see and hear from God, we help those around us to do so also. However, there will always be those who refuse to see: like the Scribes and Pharisees who crucified Jesus a few weeks after this.

Lord Have Mercy

The Church has taken the persistence of Bartimaeus and his friend to heart and the term “Lord have mercy” appears frequently in the Orthodox Liturgy. But there is a depth to this usage that often goes unappreciated.

The Greek word *eleos* meaning compassion or mercy is used widely in the New Testament as a noun, verb (to have mercy), adjective (merciful) and as a noun directed toward someone (compassionateness). This latter use of the root word *eleos* is often translated “*alms!*” Following is a summary of the use of *eleos*:

People Continuously Crying Out “Lord Have Mercy”:

- Blind Bartimaeus and companion
- Two blind men: (Matthew 9:27-31)
- Canaanite woman for her daughter; (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30)
- Ten lepers: (Luke 17:11-19)

People Begging, Imploring, Trembling, Prostrating:

- Man for epileptic son: (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29, Luke 9:37-42)
- Jairus for daughter: (Luke 8:40-56, Matthew 9:18-26, mark 5:21-43)
- Woman with hemorrhage: (Luke 8:43-48, Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34)
- One leper: (Luke 5:12-16, Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45)

In these last three cases, *eleos* isn’t mentioned but is implied.

Many Times the Lord Shows Mercy Without Specific Requests:

- Virgin Mary at Incarnation (Luke 1:46-55)
- Elizabeth at the birth of John (Luke 1:57-58)
- Zachariah, regarding John’s mission (Luke 1:67-79)
- The Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 7:25, 1 Timothy 1:13-16)
- The Gadarene Demoniac (Mark 5:19)
- Epiphroditus (Philippians 2:27)
- The Gentiles (Romans 15:9, 1 Peter 2:10)
- All believers (Romans 11:30-32, 2 Corinthians 4:1, Ephesians 2:4, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 1:3, Jude 21)
- God has mercy on whom He will (Romans 9:15-18)

The Lord Desires Mercy, Not Sacrifice:

Under the Old Testament Law, animal sacrifice was required for forgiveness of sins. The animal sacrifice represented judgment on the animal in place of the offerer, and this foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice for us. However, without mercy in one's heart, sacrifice is pointless. For example:

- The Prophets Hosea and Micah had said it (Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8)
- The Scribes and Pharisees didn't understand it (Matthew 9:13, 12:7, 23:23)
- Judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy (James 2:13)
- The wisdom from above is full of mercy (James 3:17)

Eleos (Mercy) is Often Translated "Alms":

Exploring further the depth of the word *eleos*, it is often translated "alms" from its use in context. But "alms" are merely mercy shown from one person to another in terms of money. Following are some examples where *eleos* could be translated either "mercy" or "alms":

- The Good Samaritan showed mercy (Luke 10:37)
- Dorcas of Lydda was full of good works and of mercy (Acts 9:36)
- Cornelius of Caesarea showed much mercy to the people (Acts 10:1-2). His mercy went up as a memorial before God, (v.4) and was remembered in the sight of God (v.31).
- Paul took a collection in Achaia and Macedonia (Romans 15:25-28) at the end of his third missionary journey. He called this mercies and offerings for his nation (Acts 24:17).
- By showing mercy, we gain treasure in heaven (Luke 12:31-33)
- Jesus spoke to the Pharisees: "You clean the outside of the cup or dish, but the inside is full of robbery and wickedness. Give mercy and the inside is clean also" (Luke 11:39-41). Showing mercy cleans out our insides also.
- When we show mercy, we are exhorted to do so cheerfully (Romans 12:8). There is a lot to be cheerful about.
- And also secretly, that our Father who sees in secret will reward us openly (Matthew 6:1-4), where only God sees the good stuff.

All this is quite a depth to the simple request, "Lord have mercy" that we say so often for ourselves and others. Mercy was a major focus of the message of the Twelve Apostles. We see this in their greetings in their writings: "Grace, mercy and peace..." (2 John 3, 1 Timothy 1:2, 2 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4). "Mercy, peace and love..." (Jude 2). "Peace and mercy on the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). With this as a background, it's hard to imagine that we could say "Lord have mercy" too often.

CHIEF OF SINNERS

January 23, 2011
31st Sunday after Pentecost
Revision A

EPISTLE LESSON: 1 Timothy 1:15-17

Today's Epistle lesson is used in the West on either the 13th or 19th Sunday after Pentecost (August or September).

Today's Epistle lesson addresses how far God will go in showing mercy to mankind. John Chrysostom stated this very well: "The favors of God so far exceed human hope and expectation, that often they are not believed. For God has bestowed on us such things as the mind of man never looked for, never thought of. It is for this reason that the Apostles spent much discourse in securing a belief of the gifts that are granted us of God... That those who were enemies and sinners, neither justified by the law nor by works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor" (Homily IV on 1 Timothy 1).

The Jews of Paul's day had a hard time with this. Chrysostom said of this: "It seemed to them incredible that a man who had misspent all his former life in vain and wicked actions, should afterwards be saved by his faith alone" (Ibid.). Some of the Gentiles, on the other hand, misinterpreted this grace in the other direction, thinking that the more sin God forgave, the better (Romans 5:20-6:1, 6:15, 3:8). Paul had to set them straight: they died to sin when they were baptized (Romans 6:2-3).

To illustrate how much God will forgive, Paul used himself as an example. Prior to his conversion, Paul had not just rejected the truth, but had hunted down other Christians, pursuing them to foreign cities, causing them to blaspheme and putting them to death (Acts 26:9-11). In doing so, Paul stated in the verses prior to our Epistle lesson that he blasphemed himself (v.13). And not only did God forgive Paul, but He counted him faithful and put him into the deaconate with the Apostles (v.12). Chrysostom stated it this way: "For no one who should see a prisoner admitted into a palace could doubt whether he obtained mercy. And this was visibly the situation with Paul, for he makes himself the example. Nor is he ashamed to call himself a sinner, but rather delights in it. By thus doing, he can best demonstrate the miracle of God's regard for him and that He had thought him worthy of such extraordinary kindness" (Ibid.).

In our Epistle lesson, Paul refers to himself as the chief of sinners (v.15). Yet elsewhere, he refers to himself as "blameless concerning the righteousness which is in the law" (Philippians 3:6). That is, he kept the Law, as interpreted by the Pharisees, perfectly. [The Pharisees, however, had a lower standard than the Lord Jesus. For more discussion on this see the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, "Doers of the Law"]. Yet keeping the Law was not a substitute for faith, since, "all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Therefore, Paul limited his former righteousness to that which is in the Law.

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Chrysostom stated it this way: “Compared with angels, even righteous men are sinners; and if Paul, who achieved the righteousness that is in the Law, was the chief of sinners, what other man can be called righteous? For he says this not to condemn his own life as impure; but comparing his own legal righteousness with the righteousness of God, he shows it to be worth nothing” (Ibid.).

Paul went on to say that, “for this reason (i.e. Paul being chief of sinners) I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (v.16). Chrysostom used an analogy to illustrate this: “Suppose a populous city, all of whose inhabitants were wicked to varying degrees. Suppose also that one individual among that multitude was more wicked and deserving of punishment than all the rest. If the king declared that he was willing to pardon all, it would be much more readily believed if they were to see this most wicked wretch actually pardoned. Then there could no longer be any doubt” (Ibid.).

Transposing this to Paul, Chrysostom stated that Paul means by this that greater long-suffering God could not show in any case other than Paul’s, nor could He find a sinner that so required all His pardon, all His long-suffering (Ibid.). This gives us comfort that none of our sins are so great that the Lord cannot pardon us. And thus we say so often: “Lord have mercy.”