

The Heavenly Ascent
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 10:46-52; Rv 21)

Bartimaeus represents every Christian disciple. Because of Original Sin, every man is born in a condition of darkness, blind in sin. Because of Original Sin, every man lives in “Jericho,” the city of man located in the desert. The Aramaic name of Bar-Timaeus means “son of defilement” or “son of the unclean.”

Jericho is a city which lies at the end of the Jordan River Valley, near the Dead Sea, near the place where John the Baptist preached. It was the first city conquered by Joshua when the Israelites entered the Promised Land. Archaeologists excavating the ancient city determined its walls are 10,000 years old: it is the oldest continually inhabited city on the planet! Even though it is in a desert region, there are many natural springs coming from the mountains, making it an ideal oasis. King Herod built a magnificent pleasure palace in Jericho. Jericho is in the same Dead Sea plain that is famous for other ancient cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah, which represent very pagan and sinful lifestyles.

In the time of Jesus, Jericho was the final stop for Jewish Galilean pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the festivals. Jericho is only 15 miles from Jerusalem. However, the two cities are worlds apart. Jericho is in a sweltering desert plain, 850 feet below sea level; Jerusalem is in a cool mountain height, 2500 feet above sea level. Jericho is the worldly “City of Man”; Jerusalem is the holy “City of God,” the place where heaven comes down to earth. It is this final ascent to Jerusalem by pilgrims which is sung so often in the Psalms: “*Let us go up to the house of the Lord*” (cf. Ps 122, “Psalm of Ascents”; also Is 2:3).

Another famous pilgrim Psalm makes reference to the “valley of the shadow of death,” a section of canyons along the dangerous path that winds its way up from Jericho to Jerusalem: “*The Lord is my shepherd... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff will comfort me*” (Ps 23).

When Jesus passes through Jericho in today’s Gospel, he is with the group of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for Passover, his final Passover where he will accomplish the world’s salvation. The arduous pilgrimage from Jericho to Jerusalem represents our journey in the Church with Christ from this world to heaven. “Uphill all the way,” the Christian way is the narrow path that leaves behind the pleasures of the world in order to seek the face of God. The Book of Revelation describes heaven as the true “Jerusalem,” in which God Himself is the Temple, and the Lamb is its lamp (Rv 21:22-23).

Bartimaeus, cursed by his condition of sin, “fallen man” unable to ascend to the heavenly city, is reduced to the condition of a beggar, waiting for a savior. His encounter with Jesus, by which he is able to “see,” rise up, join the pilgrims, and follow the way, is a beautiful image from St. Mark’s Gospel of the Sacrament of Baptism, by which we are enlightened through Christ by the gift of faith, and made members of the Church which is God’s pilgrim people. In Greek, which is the language of St. Mark’s Gospel, Timaeus means “honor” or “dignity.” The Gospel story shows how the encounter with Christ restores man from a condition of uncleanness and curse, to his dignity as a son created in God’s image.

Baptism enables us to join the fellow pilgrims of Christ on the ascent from this world to our heavenly destiny, passing through the “valley of death” on the way. “*The gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few*” (Mt 7:14). Christianity is an arduous path, but it is not one we undertake alone. There was safety in numbers for the pilgrims in Jesus’ day, from robbers and the dangers of the ascent, and there is likewise safety within the Church for those who seek to attain God’s presence.

This upcoming week we celebrate “All Saints Day,” calling to mind and honoring those pilgrims who have already arrived in the heavenly city, and join in the eternal worship. They are our inspiration and example, and they actively help us on our journey through intercession and encouragement.

We also celebrate this week “All Souls Day,” calling to mind those pilgrims have also arrived at the heavenly city Jerusalem, having passed through the valley of death, but who have not yet entered the gate, which is very narrow (Mt 7:14), like a “needle’s eye” (Mt 19:24). When describing the heavenly city, the Book of Revelation reminds us that “*nothing impure will ever enter it*” (Rv 21:27). If the arduous ascent has not yet fully purified a pilgrim from his sins and worldliness, this must take place in a final purgation at the top, before entering. And those still on the earthly journey can offer their prayers and sufferings for them.

The Church then, whether *triumphant* in heaven, *suffering* purgation at the gate, or *militant* along the way, is united as one, each member looking to the needs of others, until at last we all come to the eternal Passover of the heavenly city, “*glorious as a bride adorned to meet her husband*” (Rv 21:2).

With Bartimaeus, let us “*Take courage, rise up, Jesus is calling you.*” Let us leave behind our worldly identity of Defilement, and live our true identity of Honor. And with Bartimaeus, let us set out wholeheartedly and follow Jesus “*on the way*” (Mk 10:52), the heavenly ascent from Jericho to Jerusalem.