

A PRAYER PRIMER
Sermon for Pentecost 25, Proper 25B: Mk 10:46-52
LPC, 10/25/09

In some ways it's too bad that we get the Bible doled out to us in little snippets as we do when we come to church on Sundays. Conversely, when the individual books of the Bible are read continuously, patterns and themes become apparent that don't come across in our Sunday sound bites. Nowhere is this more true than in the Gospel according to Mark, from which we have been reading, in dribs and drabs, for the past several weeks.

The readings of the last three weeks, which all come from a single chapter of Mark's Gospel, have a certain unity. Let me refresh your memory.

In the first of this series, a young man comes to Jesus asking the way of eternal life. Jesus reviews the commandments for him, and the man claims to have kept all the commandments from his youth. Jesus then tells him, "You lack one thing: go sell everything you own and give to the poor, and then come follow me." The young man is apparently unable to make this sacrifice of his possessions, which we are told "are many," even when the trade-off is eternal life. He goes away empty and sad,

In the second story, which we heard last week, two of Jesus' closest followers, brothers named James and John, come to Jesus asking for the favor of sitting to Jesus' left and right when Jesus comes into his glory. Knowing that he is going to die soon for the sake of the gospel, Jesus asks them if they can drink the same cup that he, Jesus, will drink. They confidently reply in the affirmative. Then Jesus confirms that they will indeed share Jesus' own fate, facing persecution themselves for the sake of the gospel.

Today we hear a story about a blind man named Bartimaeus, who is begging by the side of the road as Jesus passes by with his disciples. Becoming aware that it is Jesus who is passing, Bartimaeus clamors for Jesus' attention, refusing to be hushed by Jesus' well-meaning companions. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants and Bartimaeus asks for the restoration of his sight, which Jesus provides. Bartimaeus in turn responds by following Jesus from thenceforth.

The unifying factor in these three anecdotes is that people are coming to Jesus with specific requests. Each gets a unique response, and each reacts differently. How does this relate to us? Think about it: coming to Jesus with a request, receiving a response, and reacting to that response. My friends, this is nothing less than a casebook about prayer.

In prayer we come before God with our own questions, concerns and requests. As Christians, we approach God through Jesus Christ, because that is what we are taught to do. Christian doctrine holds that when people approach God, they always approach through the agency of Jesus Christ, whether or not they recognize that fact ... whether or

not they even use the name “Jesus.” So when we pray, we are approaching Jesus, just as the young man, James, John and Bartimaeus approached Jesus.

We make our requests, just as they did. And we receive a response, just as they did. Let’s look at the various responses received in these three cases.

The young man who desired eternal life is commonly known as the “rich young ruler.” The rich young ruler received a response from Jesus that disappointed and dismayed him. He wanted Jesus to give him something, and Jesus’ reply was, “Fine, but you have to give, too.”

I think that happens to us latter-day petitioners too. We ask Jesus to give us something and Jesus says, “OK, here’s your share of what needs to be done to make that happen.” Sometimes that share costs us, and like the young man, we go away sorrowing. It would be an interesting exercise, wouldn’t it, to imagine what would have happened if the young man had made a different decision?

Now let’s look at the response that James and John received. They too wanted Jesus to give them something. Jesus in effect replies that they will get what they ask, but they don’t really know what they are asking. What they are asking is going to turn out to be something rather different from what they expect.

That has its parallels in our prayer life too, doesn’t it? God answers our prayers, and we get way more than we bargained for. This recalls the old saying, “Be careful what you pray for, you just might get it!”

Finally, as in the case of Bartimaeus, Jesus’ response to our requests is sometimes, “Yes, with all my heart.” This tends to happen most in cases like that of Bartimaeus, where the petitioner is broken and humble and comes to Jesus asking first for mercy, and only afterwards, when prompted by Jesus, for his or her specific request.

This happens to us too when we pray. We know it does. The spontaneous cure, the assurance of things hoped for in the face of terrible circumstances, the gifts needed to accomplish a task.

Some people say that God has not responded to their prayers. But I wonder about that. Could it be that people assume that God has not responded because God has not responded as they expect? Could it be that they expected a Bartimaeus response, but received a rich-young-ruler response and just didn’t recognize it? Or didn’t want to recognize it?

The Gospel-writer Mark has given us a primer for prayer. There are different petitioners. There are different kinds of prayers. Each receives a unique and appropriate response. God always responds. May those who have ears, hear.