

Prayer changes us, so that we can change the world

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Pentecost + 22 – Mark 10 46-52 Blind Bartimaeus

One of the oldest prayers of the Church is called the 'Jesus Prayer'. *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* It should ring a bell; we sing a version of it every Sunday in the Kyries – *Lord have mercy.* And today we heard it when Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus, '*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*'. His cry is one of the earliest forms of the Jesus prayer we have. And my experience of this prayer is that when you pray it, things really happen.

Sr Joan Chittister ^{OSB} says "...prayer is not something given to us to change the world. It's meant to change us, so that we can change the world." Please hear that carefully; *prayer is given to us.* Does that match what we think prayer is?

I think this means that the words we pray may be ours, but what makes them *prayer* is a gift from God. It's only possible that our words become *prayer* because God has reached out to us first; God has come near to us, like Jesus did for Bartimaeus. Without that nearness, there's no prayer; just words. God coming near is the enabling thing; it gives us the gift of prayer.

"...prayer is not something given to us to change the world. *It's meant to change us,* so that we can change the world."; it's given to us to enable change

Today we see that gift for change at work. Bartimaeus refuses to let his gift be silenced or controlled. The immediate effect on him is that his prayer sets him free from worry about his most precious belongings; they are the good will of

his neighbours, and his beggar's cloak – both absolutely critical to his survival. He ignores his neighbours' attempts to control his access to Jesus. And he throws off his cloak. He might never find it again. Bartimaeus discarding his cloak becomes for us an image of someone who leaves their old life behind when he springs up to go to Jesus. "...prayer is not something given to us to change the world. It's meant to change us, *so that we can change the world.*" ...

Prayer changes the people around Bartimaeus because of this change they see in him – he changes from a beggar into a disciple. As Bartimaeus blindly feels his way towards Jesus, people who, moments ago, were trying to shut him up have turned into his cheer squad. They were an impediment to his healing one minute, and an aid to it the next. "...prayer is not something given to us to change the world. It's meant to change us, *so that we can change the world.*"

In today's Gospel passage, I see this understanding of prayer come to life in a way that confronts me head on. I feel Mark's eyes on me. I'm one of that capricious crowd. First I'm trying to gag Bartimaeus – sternly ordering him to be quiet – and then the moment Jesus has said the magic words, 'call him here', I change and become all friendly and encouraging; 'Take heart; get up, he is calling you.'

I'm afraid that first reaction is sometimes my instinctive behaviour when I'm confronted by overwhelming need; need that I can't possibly meet myself. Rather than refer it on to Jesus, who can meet any need, I can be tempted to turn a blind eye to the need: to turn my back; "*what can I do about it?*" And if it's insistent, I might even be tempted to discourage the messenger from telling me about it.

When I do that, who's being blind to what Jesus can do? Who needs to be changed? Today, Mark helps us see a blind beggar sitting next to the dusty road that runs up from Jericho to Jerusalem. I wouldn't have seen him otherwise. And that beggar

Bartimaeus – *son of honour* – teaches me and the rest of the crowd that we're blind to Jesus – blind to his love, and so blind to the real reason of his coming. The blind man reveals this to us; to people who can be spiritually blind.

We learn through the gift of prayer to see people who pray out of deep need; we learn to see them as Jesus sees them – not in terms of how they inconvenience or embarrass us with our inadequacy – but through the eyes of love. And that changes us. It changes us so we become ready to be Christ on earth now – his body – and in his power, to throw off our mantle and step forward to change the world. Amen