

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Jeremiah 31:7-9

Jeremiah was the second of the four great prophets of Israel, a contemporary of Zephaniah, Nahum & Habakkuk. He was born around the year 645 B.C., almost a century after Isaiah. He came from a priestly family in Anathoth, a town about three miles northeast of Jerusalem, in the southern kingdom of Judah.

God called him to be a prophet in 626 B.C., when he was 19 years old. By express order of Yahweh he remained unmarried (Jeremiah 16:2), embracing celibacy with generosity. God's call came to him at a time when the kingdom of Judah was about to collapse. Although he preferred a quiet family life and small-town friendships, he realized he could not contain the sentiments God had placed in his heart. For more than 40 years, up to his death, he remained faithful to his vocation and prophesied until after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. When Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah was forcibly taken to Egypt by his fellow Judahites. In Egypt, Jeremiah prophesied against idolatrous Jews, and probably died soon after, either stoned or starved to death by those same men, who could not take his criticism.

Jeremiah's book tells of his calling to be a prophet and chronicles the downfall of Judah through mistaken covenants and broken covenants. He reminds his hearers that God is a just judge who takes covenants very seriously. He then goes on to prophesy about the restoration of the northern and southern kingdoms (Israel and Judah). Today's reading talks about the restoration of Israel and the new exodus.

⁷ [T]hus says the LORD:

The prophet wants everyone to know whose message he is delivering. Jeremiah uses the phrase 132 times (New American Bible) [150 times in the Revised Standard Version, 148 in the King James Version].

Shout with joy for Jacob, exult at the head of the nations; proclaim your praise and say: The LORD has delivered his people, the remnant of Israel.

God has bestowed salvation on His people (Isaiah 12:6; 44:23). These people are called the 'remnant' – the small number who escaped when the northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. and have been purified through their exile to constitute the new Israel, faithful to her God.

⁸ Behold, I will bring them back from the land of the north; I will gather them from the ends of the world,

This is synonymous with the north (Assyria), where they have been kept captive (see Isaiah 43:5-6).

with the blind and the lame in their midst, The mothers and those with child; they shall return as an immense throng.

The caravan is composed of weak people, a sign of the miraculous nature of the event (see Isaiah 35:5-6).

⁹ They departed in tears,

A contrast to returning in joy (Psalm 126 uses this same contrast in describing the return from exile).

but I will console them and guide them; I will lead them to brooks of water,

An allusion to the “rock” incidents of the first exodus (17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-13) but now it is constantly flowing (Isaiah 35:6-7).

on a level road, so that none shall stumble.

Accentuates how easy the march will be, in contrast to the first exodus (Isaiah 35:8; 40:4).

For I am a father to Israel,

The notion of the fatherhood of Yahweh toward Israel (“Israel is my firstborn”) is sporadic in the Old Testament. It serves to define their covenant relationship (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:6). The Israel referred to here is not necessarily the northern kingdom, but the original single kingdom which was formed by the people of the original exodus.

Ephraim is my first-born.

Ephraim was the second son of Joseph whom Israel (Jacob, twin brother of Esau and son of Isaac) gave the blessing instead of the older brother Manasseh (Genesis 48:17-20). The blessing can be traced from Noah to Shem (his first-born, Genesis 9:26), Isaac to Jacob (Genesis 27:26), and now Jacob (Israel) to Ephraim. Although the blessing, by Hebrew tradition went to the first-born, it is interesting that, in the history of God’s people, the second-born has usually proven more righteous than the first-born and has received the blessing. The notable exceptions are Shem and Abraham.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 5:1-6

As we continue on with our study of the book of Hebrews let's look at its location in the New Testament. The New Testament epistles (wisdom books) are located after the legal books (gospels) and the historical book (Acts) and before the book of prophecy (Revelation). The wisdom books are further divided by author (Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude), and within each author by length with the longest appearing first. The author of Hebrews is unknown. As recently as 1914 the Pontifical Biblical Commission reaffirmed that the Church has not decided that St. Paul is the author. That is why the reading is simply announced as "from the letter to the Hebrews." The book is located in the New Testament after the epistles of Paul and before those of Peter; quite possibly because of its length.

The basic teaching of the Letter to the Hebrews centers on showing the superiority of the Christian religion over Judaism. This argument develops in three stages:

- 1) Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is superior to the angels, although He became less than the angels to lead us by example.
- 2) Christ is superior to Moses. This is the reading the Episcopalians and Lutherans heard 2 weeks ago.
- 3) Jesus, the Son of God, is the great high priest. His priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek, superior to the priesthood of Aaron, from whom the Levitical priesthood is derived.

Who is this Melchizedek? We know very little of him through what is recorded in Holy Scripture, but the Jewish targums [Aramaic translations and paraphrases of the Old Testament which came into use after the exile (586 B.C.)] and other writings make it very clear that Jewish tradition identifies him as Noah's firstborn son, Shem. Melchizedek is his throne name (just as John Paul II is the throne name of Karol Wojtyła).

"When Abraham returned from the war, Shem, or, as he is sometimes called, Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, priest of God Most High, and king of Jerusalem, came forth to meet him with bread and wine" [see Genesis 14:17-18] (Ginzberg, Louis, *Legends of the Bible*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1956, page 106).

How can this be? Noah lived many years before Abraham. After all, it was Noah and his descendants who repopulated the world after the flood and there are lots of people around when Abraham is living. Let's look at Genesis 11:10-26 for a few minutes. This passage traces the genealogy of Abraham (or Abram as he was known before God changed his name) from Shem, Noah's firstborn son. From this passage, if we do the math, we find that Shem lived for six hundred years; and in fact, outlived Abraham, who himself lived to be 175, by 35 years. Did people really live that long back then? We don't know, but the sacred author certainly wants us to be able to see the connection between Shem-Melchizedek and Abraham.

Why is this connection important? Because it traces the priesthood of the family. As

we follow the blessing through Scripture we find that in Genesis 9:1, 9 Noah is blessed by God and in Genesis 9:26 Shem is blessed by Noah. The next mention of the blessing is in Genesis 14:19 where Abram is blessed by Melchizedek. Later, Isaac is blessed and then Isaac passes the blessing on to Jacob instead of Esau, as he had intended. When he finds that he has been deceived, Isaac tells Esau that the blessing cannot be taken back and describes the effect of this priestly ordination “I have already appointed him your master, and I have assigned to him all his kinsmen as his slaves” (Genesis 27:37). This is the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, the priesthood of the family.

¹ Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

This is the duty of the high priest (Leviticus 16:20-22). Jesus, as high priest, makes these offerings in heaven on our behalf. Some commentators have postulated, wrongly I believe, that “gifts” refers to grain offerings while “sacrifices” refers to animal offerings. As chapter 9 shows, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) rite is the Old Testament rite with which the author is principally concerned – it is atonement for the sins of the people, not individual sin (Leviticus 16:30, 34).

² He is able to deal patiently

The Greek term translated here as “deal patiently” appears nowhere else in the Bible. It is a term signifying the right mean between passion and lack of feeling.

with the ignorant and erring,

The only sins for which sacrificial atonement was impossible were those designated in Numbers 15:30 as sins committed with a “high hand”. These sins are probably sins perpetrated of set purpose, rather than those into which man “fell” through human weakness.

for he himself is beset by weakness ³ and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people.

Being beset by weakness is concupiscence. The weakness that leads to sin. Everyone, including the priest, is a sinner. On the day of atonement, the high priest, before entering the Holy of Holies, offered a sin offering for his own sins as well as those of the people (Leviticus 16:3, 6, 11; Hebrews 9:6-14).

⁴ No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ In the same way, it was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest, but rather the one who said to him: “You are my son; this day I have begotten you”;

Psalm 2:7 (Hebrews 4:14).

⁶ just as he says in another place: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Genesis 14:18 and Psalm 110:4. Unlike Levitical priests, who began their apprenticeship at age 25, were ordained at age 30, and were required to retire at age 50, Shem-Melchizedek kept the blessing for over 400 years before passing it on to Abraham. Once the blessing was conferred, the father continued in his position as elder of the family until he died, but the one who received the blessing had the responsibility for the well-being of the family. Jesus is not a Levitical (Aaronite) high priest but a pre-golden calf high priest (first-born son) through His Father’s blessing; just like Melchizedek. Since He is a pre-golden calf priest, He does not have to prove His genealogy and is not subject to a time limit on the exercise of His priesthood. We will look more at Melchizedek next week.

Gospel - Mark 10:46-52

Last week we heard Jesus’ third instruction on Christology and discipleship. These three instructions can briefly be summarized as follows:

- 1) Jesus must suffer and die and in 3 days he will rise.
- 2) The disciple must forsake all earthly impediments and depend totally upon God. Trust and serve like a child.
- 3) The humble disciple will receive earthly rewards for his service – including persecution. The persecution will help form his spirit in reparation for entering the kingdom of God.

This week we hear of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. In Mark 8:22-26 an unnamed blind man is brought to Jesus, has his sight restored gradually, and is told to keep his healing a secret. In today’s story, Bartimaeus actively seeks out Jesus, is healed immediately, and becomes a disciple on the way. This second story, the last before Mark begins his description of Passion Week, illustrates some progress in faith. It is as much a call story as a healing story. Bartimaeus’ reaction to Jesus and his willingness to follow Him on the way of discipleship contrast with the disciples’ misunderstanding and blindness during the journey.

⁴⁶ [A]s he [Jesus] was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd,

Jericho is 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem and 5 miles west of the Jordan River. The journey which began in Caesarea Philippi is reaching its destination in Jerusalem.

Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging.

Bartimaeus is the Aramaic form, the explanation “son of Timaeus” is the Greek translation.

It is unusual for Mark to name the person to be healed.

“Mark has recorded both the name of Bartimaeus and of his father, a circumstance which scarcely occurs in all the many cases of healing which had been performed by the Lord. ... Consequently there can be little doubt that this Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, had fallen from some position of great prosperity, and was now regarded as an object of the most notorious and the most remarkable wretchedness, because, in addition to being blind, he had also to sit begging” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. AD. 400), *The Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2,65].

47 On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, son of David, have pity on me.”

This is the first public application of the messianic title “Son of David” to Jesus. It is also the first recognition (apart from Peter) of Jesus’ true identity by a human being rather than a demon. The title “Son of David” designates Jesus as the heir of the promise made to David through Nathan (2 Samuel 7:12-16; 1 Chronicles 17:11-14; Psalm 89:29-38).

48 And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

In Mark 3:12 and 8:30, Jesus commands silence, but here Jesus shows no displeasure over Bartimaeus’ acclamation.

But he kept calling out all the more,

Emphasizes the acclamation

“Son of David, have pity on me.” 49 Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take courage; get up, he is calling you.” 50 He threw aside his cloak,

May have been a garment but could also have been a cloth spread out to receive offerings. The suggestion is that Bartimaeus was putting aside the old order to be able to put on the new (baptismal imagery).

sprang up, and came to Jesus. 51 Jesus said to him in reply, “What do you want me to do for you?”

Jesus’ question is the same as to James and John (Mark 10:36). Their request for seats of honor contrasts with Bartimaeus’ humble request. The blind man has already received a spiritual healing and “sees” the nature of Jesus’ kingly authority; it stoops to serve.

The blind man replied to him, “Master, I want to see.” 52 Jesus told him, “Go your way; your faith has saved you.”

Faith is the necessary prerequisite for a miracle and an essential demand of Jesus' preaching. Before the resurrection it could not, however, have meant an act of belief in Christ as a divine person. During Jesus' ministry it would have meant a receptivity to God's healing word proclaimed by Jesus, together with a confident self-abandonment to God whose saving power was being exercised in and through Jesus.

Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

Actually walked in His footsteps. A follower accompanied Jesus on His journey. Bartimaeus may well have joined in Jesus' passion experience; he had received a spiritual and physical healing.

“So let us follow Him as our pattern: offering Him for our ransom, receiving Him as our Eucharistic food and waiting for Him as our endless and exceeding great reward” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (between A.D. 391-430), *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons, For the Easter Season*, (No. 231,2)].