

## A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 10:46-52

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The story of Bartimaeus is one of the great stories of the Gospel of Mark. It begins with a statement about coming to Jericho. Notice that it's a very short sentence that gets a lot of emphasis. The emphasis is on Jericho as a place of victory for the people of Israel. All of the associations of Jericho are shaped by that great victory when the people of Israel crossed into the Promised Land. The contrast between that victory and the status of Bartimaeus is what gives poignancy to this first episode. To heighten that memory of Jericho is important in order to establish the contrast to Bartimaeus' lowly position in Jericho as a blind beggar.

The irony is even further increased by the beggar's name. *Bartimaeus* means "a son of honor." Mark makes the irony immediately present by spelling out that Bartimaeus is "the son of Timaeus" and, just in case you might miss it, "a blind beggar." Mark translates Bartimaeus into its parts: "the son of Timaeus," which everyone in Mark's audience would have known means *honor*. The contrast between his name, "son of honor," and being a blind beggar, the supreme experience of shame in Jericho, is made crystal clear by all of this attention to his name. For he was sitting in the dust "by the side of the road." Your goal as storyteller in this part of the telling is to heighten that contrast as much as possible.

Mark makes the volume of Bartimaeus' cry to Jesus unambiguous. The contrast between "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth" and "he began to shout out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'" should be dramatic. The first part of the sentence is soft; then it explodes. The phrase to "have mercy" was a phrase that was used by supplicants, often by people who had been captured by an enemy general who were about to be executed. They would fall on their faces before the general and pray for mercy, that is, that their lives would not be taken, that they wouldn't be killed. In this instance, it is a prayer for mercy by one who is blind and who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth may be able to help him.

Just like the disciples with the people bringing children to Jesus, those who are standing by rebuke Bartimaeus and tell him to shut up. However you translate that, convey this prohibition and the sense of trying to prevent him from getting to Jesus. But Bartimaeus cries out all the louder. Be sure to do that: make the second cry even louder than the first one.

Jesus then stops and says, "Call him." It's a short sentence and it's a clear command to call the man. And so they do. They tell him that Jesus is asking for him. So Bartimaeus leaps up and throws off his cloak with which he begged, and came to Jesus. In telling the story, make this part energetic. You may even want to make a gesture of throwing off a cloak and searching with hands out as he came forward to speak to Jesus.

The dialogue between Jesus and Bartimaeus is highly intimate. Just as with James and John who ask him, "We want you to do whatever we ask of you" and Jesus' reply, "What do you want me to do for you," so also with Bartimaeus who has demanded Jesus' attention. Jesus asks him the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" The contrast between the request of James and John and Bartimaeus is made explicit in the story. They ask for power, Bartimaeus asks for sight.

The words "My teacher" are a translation of the Greek, which means "My Rabbi." As storyteller, you can use either. Bartimaeus' request is then, "I want..." I think it's important to include these words. Literally, in the Greek it is, "in order that I might see again." But this is an expression of his desire, of what he wants, and so to say that explicitly is clearer in relation to what Jesus is asking: "What do you want?" "I want to see again." The translation "to see again" is implicit in the Greek word, which is *anuplefsō* rather than the normal *plefsō*, the normal word for "to see." It is an intensive and an indication that he could previously see but had lost his sight. He wants to be able to see *again*.

Jesus' does *not* respond by touching him. He does not do anything. He simply tells him to go on and that his faith has made him well. And immediately Bartimaeus receives his sight. The conversation is intimate and results in the immediate answer to Bartimaeus' request for help. In contrast to James and John, Bartimaeus immediately receives what he wants. This is both a healing story and a call story because Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way." It is the story of the call of another disciple who follows Jesus as the result of his being able to see.