**THE TWO BLIND MEN AND THE DEMONIAC St Matt. 9: 27-35**

Today’s Gospel reading from St Matthew chapter 9 gives us two abbreviated accounts of miracles which are treated at greater length and with differences in the other synoptic gospels, St Mark and St Luke. In those there is only one blind man and in Mark’s account chapter 10 he is identified specifically as Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. Luke does not name him but his account is the same. The incident takes place at the entrance to Jericho where the blind man is shouting out to the Lord to have mercy on him, much to the annoyance of the crowd. On hearing him the Lord’s question to the blind man is the same in the two accounts, “What do you want me to do for you?”. He responds “Receive my sight” and the Lord grants his wish with the words “Your faith has made you well”.

St Matthew’s account does not mention Jericho though this is mentioned in a separate account of the healing of another two blind men in chapter 20. The two men similarly are shouting after the Lord, “Have mercy on us, Son of David”. His question to them is slightly different, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” It receives an unqualified ‘yes’, and they are immediately healed. In another context where the disciples are unable to cure an epileptic boy, this same question receives the qualified but truthful answer from the father, “I believe, help my unbelief”.

In the second part of today’s Gospel a man who has a demon and is mute is brought to Jesus. The demon is cast out and he immediately speaks. The crowds are amazed and comment that “Never in Israel was anything seen like this”, while the Pharisees explain the event with the weak and totally inadequate argument that he casts out demons by the Prince of demons. Elsewhere the Lord points out that if civil war is taking place amongst the demons the house would be torn apart like any divided kingdom.

So there is a poignant question to us from this reading about the depths of our faith but perhaps before this we each need to answer the question “What do you want me to do for you?” which the Lord posed in the other accounts. This requires deep thought and prayer and may not be as obvious as what the blind men or the demoniac need, the restoration of something so obviously physical. We are complicated beings in terms of our psychological, emotional and physical makeup. We may not like what we see inside ourselves but admitting that we are ill may be the beginnings of the healing process within. There are two poles in the spiritual life between which we hover. One is to ask in prayer for those things which we genuinely need and the Lord makes it clear that to ask for the Holy Spirit is an essential request.

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He reminds us of the goodness of our Heavenly Father in responding to our prayers and the need to persist in prayer and not give up. “What father amongst you if his son asks for bread would give him a stone?” And to encourage us not to give up a parable is told of a judge who is pestered by a widow to grant her justice against her enemy. She comes so often that the only way he can get rid of her is to grant her request. Similarly, the Canaanite woman prevails over Christ to grant her daughter’s healing through sheer insistence or unswerving faith. The other pole is that of suffering and taking up our cross which we read about so often in the Gospels. St Paul counsels Timothy, “Take your share of suffering like a good soldier of Jesus Christ’. “There is no salvation without suffering”, remarks St Seraphim of Sarov. Of course as sinful humans we look for the easier way. Many years ago I asked my confessor about problems with a group of people in the church. He told me the story of a saint of Kiev who asked God similarly for delivery from a very painful situation. John the Baptist appeared to him and offered to release him but advised him that it would be much more profitable for him if he continued to suffer, which he and I did. So only by prayer and the sound advice of a spiritual advisor can we know these things.

In the concluding part of today’s reading we read that “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity”. If this is the case, firstly it’s not surprising that sometimes we simply cannot reconcile the accounts in the different Gospels since he must have healed thousands but far more importantly, as followers of Christ our prayers for each other, for the world and for ourselves should leave no one or nothing out. We look around us today at Afghanistan, where terrorists are amassing from far and wide to bring down the government and introduce a regime of barbarity and cruelty in the name of religion; at Lebanon which has just commemorated the first anniversary of the biggest non-military explosion in history and is riven with factional division, at the authoritarian regimes in different countries, at the problems in our societies, in our families and in ourselves. All these need constant prayer for healing and restoration. “Cast your cares upon him for he cares about you’, advises the Apostle but perhaps we need to start with a glimpse of the power of prayer to inspire us and cry out to Christ in humility like the father in the story. “I believe that you are able to do it but help my unbelief” and go forward in hope and persistent prayer for the salvation of the world.

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