

Sight and Insight

“You cannot depend on your eyes
when your imagination is out of focus.”

So says that famous agnostic Mark Twain.

It's the same point that another Mark,
the author of Mark's gospel,
drives home this morning.

Two weeks ago,
we visited with the rich young man
who comes running up to Jesus
looking for the way into life.

He leaves with his head hanging low
because
what he owns actually owns him;
and he can't bear to change that relationship.

Last week,
two of the twelve approach Jesus,
and respond to his question:
“What do you want me to do for you?”
with requests for power
and glory.

And here we are today,
with Jesus
continuing his journey on the way,
heading into and then out of Jericho,
the last stop before confrontation and conflict in Jerusalem.

Someone else approaches him today,
not rich and young but poor and blind;
who throws away the only thing he owns,
the cloak that serves as his blanket at night,
that is his umbrella in the rain,
and his place to sit during the day;
his one possession,

tossed away
without a thought
when he hears the call
of the one
he knows to be
Messiah.

When Jesus asks him what it is that he wants,
it's not to be seen,
but to see;
not to have followers,
but to follow.

And while Jesus can't give places of honor away,
he can give sight to this
already
insightful blind man.

The whole thrust of Mark's gospel,
it seems,
is to move us from
sight to insight.

While those closest to Jesus can see,
what they seem to lack,
right up until
the very morning of the resurrection,
is insight.

And so Mark takes us along as the most unlikely people,
the unclean,
the outsiders,
the hopelessly lost,
all display the insight that allows them to see Jesus for who he really is;
even as those closest to him,
keep missing
what is standing there,
right before their eyes.

Mark makes us look at the woman who is bleeding for twelve years.

She has no right to approach Jesus,

much less touch him,
for to touch him will make him ritually unclean;
but she pushes through the crowd and touches him anyway;
and he responds not with reproach,
but with the same life changing words he utters today to Bartimaeus:

“Go, your faith has made you well.”

Mark drags us along as the Syro-Phoenecian woman confronts Jesus on behalf of her possessed daughter:
and refusing to take even Jesus’ “no” for an answer,
presses on until what she needs is given.

Mark brings us face to face
with the desperate father
who struggles to increase his own faith so that his son may be delivered.

Mark sets us alongside Jairus,
the temple big shot,
who resists the taunts of the crowd
to give it up
because his beloved little girl, they say, is already dead,
but his insight allows him to stand there,
hearing the most precious words
ever uttered in his lifetime:
“Talitha cum – Little girl, I tell you, get up.”

It is children and aliens and free lancing exorcists whom Jesus commends to us
as examples
of those whom insight welcomes,
even when ordinary sight urges us to reject them.

The insight that Mark tries so desperately to bring us to is that “faith is not so much right belief nor pious resignation to inscrutable providence ... it is the refusal to be silenced,
it is the refusal to wait for a better time,
it is the refusal to wait for an appointment.
It is the rude insistence that the calamity be attended to not later,
but now.”

T.W. Jennings, *The Insurrection of the Crucified*, 175, paraphrase.

We have great examples of this attitude of confident insistence with two saints from our islands.

Yesterday's paper has a story about Sacred Hearts students doing a play about the just canonized Maryann Cope.

What people who saw the play were shocked over was how tough Mother Mary was.

And when some folks complained that the play wasn't accurate, the good sisters replied: "No, that's how she was!

She took no guff from government folks who tried to excuse the poor treatment of Hansen's Disease patients.

Fr Damian was no different. Listen to what people in power said about him:

"He has written abroad representing the lepers as neglected by the government... The Bishop is dissatisfied with him and says he obtains money under false pretenses...and now he disregards me and the Board of Health."

Walter Murray Gibson – President Board of Health-1883

And there is this.

"He merits great praise for the sacrifice he has made of his life and liberty but unfortunately as this praise has come to him, he has swallowed it.

He has become intoxicated and now he is becoming dangerous.

Father Leonor Foesnel- Damien's Religious Superior 1887

"What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks.

How do we answer that question today?

An exceptionally popular book a few years ago was called "The Secret."

It provides one very popular way to answer that question.

Here's one gal's take on it:

"In 2007, my mother-in-law handed me a copy of The Secret book on CD. She told me to listen to it.

She was very excited about it.

I have never been one to be interested in self-help stuff so I took it, thinking I would probably never listen to it.
I popped it into my CD player in my car, though, and began to listen.
I was absolutely blown away.
I could not stop listening to it.
I listened over and over and over, while I drove, while I walked, while I lay in bed.

One day, while I was walking, I placed my order to the Universe for my new house.”

She goes on to report that her order got filled and now she’s living in her dream house.

Another person reports putting in an order for \$500 for a plane ticket to Mexico.

When the money doesn’t arrive, this person reports calling God on the carpet, demanding an explanation for God dropping the ball.

What different ways to answer the question posed by Jesus!

Some give the same answer that James and John gave: satisfy my cravings
God,
and please ...
do it right away.

Mark rejects that path.

Mark takes us deeper.

What the blind Bartimaeus asks is quite different from what James and John ask,
quite different from the approach hawked by The Secret and its many devotees.

The blind man asks not to be seen,
but to see —
not for honor,
but for vision —
not to be superior to ordinary people,

but to become ordinary himself —
not to rule over others,
but to join others in following Jesus.

And so Mark challenges the church of his day and our church today.

The fact is,
every church needs to acknowledge the temptation to put buildings and
grounds
before people and hungry stomachs.

Every church needs to ask whether
our possessions are a
blessing or a chain.

And I must say to you,
that St. Elizabeth's can be grateful because we have asked,
and continue to ask,
these very hard questions.

And as a result of asking these hard questions,
St. E's has,
over these last many years,
embarked yet again on its core mission of going out of these walls, beyond
these gates,
and bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to those in our neighborhoods,
neighborhoods both near and far.

With that going out,
we have been given,
from time to time,
the gift of insight:
insight to see that those who appear so different are in fact so much like we
are:
children of the living God;
hoping for a life lived in peace.

We have been given,
from time to time,
the insight to see that money is never the problem:
there is always plenty of money.

The problem always was and always will be whether we,
like Bartameaus,
are willing to throw away everything we have and follow the Lord of Life;
or whether we will be handcuffed,
like the rich young man;
afraid to lose anything and therefore
grasping tight to
everything.

So it is today that Mark
urges us to focus **not** our eyes,
but our imaginations;
and with imagination to marvel as Jesus turns relationships of power upside
down,
as Jesus unleashes the paradox of losing life to save it,
of the last being first,
of the slave being the greatest,
and with unleashed paradox
subverting the world that we see,
welcoming us into a new world that is only revealed to those with insight.

Jesus, you see, is not about seizing power,
he is about transforming relationships;
all relationships,
from the most intimate
to
the very structures that make up our society.
Jesus invites us to join with those who labor,
as Dorothy Day says,
to build a new society
within the shell
of the old.

Such is the movement from sight to insight.

This is the disciple's journey.

May your journey be blessed.

+amen