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by Mary M. McGlone

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Some ask, "What was Jesus like?" The Letter to the Hebrews takes on a different question: "What was it like to be Jesus?" Stained glass windows, art, homilies and books about Jesus rarely explore what it might have been like to be a human being exploring the vocation to be the unique son of God incarnate. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus did not take his vocation on himself, but was called by God.

How did he know to what God had called him? We hear of two great epiphanies: one when John baptized Jesus, the other on the mountain of the transfiguration. Yet, in each, Jesus heard only that he was God's own son — the same thing God had said to Israel. How then, did Jesus know who he was called to be and what he was called to do?

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Jeremiah 31:7-9

Psalm 126

Hebrews 5:1-6

Mark 10:46-52

The story of Bartimaeus is the last healing described in Mark's Gospel. In the first healing (Mark 1:21-28), Jesus expelled an evil spirit who called him "Jesus of Nazareth ... the holy one of God." What a title! It was perfectly designed to engender pride without demanding anything in the way of love. When Bartimaeus heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, he called him "Son of David," a title that recalled the vocation of a shepherd king, the person responsible to care for God's flock. The demons tempted Jesus with status, Bartimaeus begged for action.

As Mark tells it, Bartimaeus kept calling out to Jesus. Over and over again he asked for mercy, using the Greek word we use when we sing "Kyrie eleison." Eleison — mercy — does not seek alms or sympathy, but rather a powerful sort of solidarity; it's a mercy that impels one to act on behalf of someone who needs help. While the crowd tried to silence Bartimaeus, Jesus told them to call him to come forward. Then, investing the beggar with all the dignity of an honored client, Jesus invited him to speak for himself: to say exactly what it was that he wanted. Without hesitation Bartimaeus answered, "Rabboni, I want to see."

There, in front of the disciples and surrounding crowds, Bartimaeus had pronounced his creed. He called Jesus of Nazareth the Son of David, thus acknowledging his role in the history of their people. Calling him rabboni (translated in our reading as master), Bartimaeus, like Mary of Magdala in the garden, recognized Jesus as the highest-ranking teacher one could find.

By calling Jesus rabboni, Bartimaeus indicated that he was asking for more than eyesight, thus his dialogue with Jesus carries a variety of meanings. Jesus told Bartimaeus saying, "Go your way, your faith has saved you." Mark explains that as a result, Bartimaeus made Jesus' way his own; he joined Jesus on the road to Jerusalem where the cross and resurrection would reveal the true meaning of the titles Jesus bore.

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In the great revelations at his baptism and on the mountain, Jesus heard himself called Son of God. He would learn how that role called him to overcome the demonic and to fulfill the hopes of those who searched for God. Jesus embodied a threat to demonic powers: to all that trapped people in mental and physical illness, all that led authorities to act like dictators rather than shepherds, to all the egoism and self-protecting fear that can ambush even the best of people and lead them to disfigure themselves as images of their creator. People in need called Jesus forth as a Davidic shepherd leader. People who truly wanted to see called him forth as their rabboni. Jesus took on the titles of Son of God, Son of David, and rabboni as relational terms.

As the Letter to the Hebrews says, Jesus did not assume those roles, he was called into them.

Jesus was called by God through the people who responded to him. As the Son, he learned to act in the name of the God whose love cannot be imposed. What it was like to be Jesus was to be hopeful, generous, capable of much, but able to do only as much as others would accept from him. That is how he was Godlike.

The awesome truth of this is that we hold the power to allow Christ to be our shepherd king, our rabboni, or simply an image on a holy card. Bartimaeus moved from asking Jesus to be the healing shepherd king to allowing him to be the teacher who would lead him down the road to total self-giving. As we draw toward the last weeks of our liturgical year, Bartimaeus and the Letter to the Hebrews ask two key questions: "Who do we allow God and Christ to be for us?" and, "What does this call us to do?"

[St. Joseph Sr. Mary M. McGlone serves on the congregational leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.]

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