#746 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 4)

Colleagues,

This week we return to the next part of my fellow Thursday Theology editor Jerry Burce's extended exploration of the Gospel of Mark, which he first presented during the pre-conference to the Fourth International Crossings Conference in January 2012 in Belleville, Illinois. (The previous parts were ThTheol #742, #743, and #744.)

When we last left off, Jerry was walking us through Mark's Gospel a second time, this time digging deeply into several specific episodes. In #744, those episodes included "spit miracles" from what Jerry identifies as Mark's first symphonic "movement"—the one set around the Sea of Galilee. This time he takes us through the Gospel's next two movements ("On the Road" and "At the Temple"), focusing on the healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus and on the troublesome story of the poor widow's offering at the temple.

I trust you'll find much food for thought in Jerry's incisive and frank ruminations, particularly because the material he discusses this week will be showing up in the gospel readings throughout this October and into November.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Orthographic note:

e = epsilonee = etao = omicronw = omega

29. On we go to our next pericope. It’s the final episode in the Road Movement. 10:46-52—46They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. 47When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ 48Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’ 49Jesus stood still and said, ‘Call him here.’ And they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Take heart; get up, he is calling you.’ 50So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. 51Then Jesus said to him, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man said to him, ‘My teacher, let me see again.’ 52Jesus said to him, ‘Go; your faith has made you well.’ Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.
30. In a change from prior procedure let’s start this time with the story itself, dig into it for a while, then track back for the context that gives it final shape for us.
31. So, 10:46. J. is leaving Jericho with the swarming retinue, disciples in close, a mob milling around. The crowds won’t leave him alone, you know. Part of it, I’m sure, is the entertainment factor. You have to spend time in a poor, third-world country to know what this is about, and how it looks and smells. Swarming is exactly the word. That’s what you do when life is boring. Folks will run for miles to be diverted.
32. At the roadside sits a blind beggar. The closest U.S. equivalent is the guy standing at the end of the freeway exit with a sign around his neck saying Help Me. He makes passersby feel helpless. He stirs their contempt.
33. Getting wind that this is J. of Nazareth—you pick up on lots of stuff at the roadside when no one’s paying you heed—he starts to cry out. The verb is kradzo. That’s what

the demons do when J. comes near them; it's what a desperate father does, earlier in this movement, 9:24: "Lord I believe; help thou my unbelief!" Kradzo is what Jesus does with his dying breath, as I've mentioned earlier.

34. If, by the way, you're on the receiving end, kradzo is obnoxious, annoying in the extreme. There's nothing polite or pious about it, nothing at all. It makes you want to kick somebody in the teeth, well, maybe not you, not that, but still, you want the noise to stop.
35. As does the crowd, v48. Again, you've got to be there to see it, how in parts of the world people are blunt, cold, and unabashed in giving someone a public scolding, and they aren't restrained by Western notions of decency or kindness. A blind jerk is still a jerk and you treat him that way.
36. Still v. 48, he bellers all the more—-"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Jaster says that eleison, "have mercy on me," is what people commonly yelled out to kings and emperors as their retinues swished by. You'll be tempted to think, maybe, that identifying Jesus as he does signals some kind of special wisdom or insight on Bartimaeus's part. It doesn't. Again, he's listened for months to the roadside chatter. And flattery is the essential tool for a beggar's living, such as it is. Rolling the dice he bellers again.
37. V. 49, Jesus stops. "Buck up," says the crowd, "He's calling you," and so he is, though not in the way the crowd thinks.
38. V. 50, Bartimaeus jumps up. This is his one and only big chance, he's going for it. "What do you want?" says Jesus, though it's more than that. What do you want me to do for you. Answer: Rabbouni, (i.e. the disciple's term for his particular teacher): "My teacher, let me see again."

Making the connections, are we?

39. V. 52, “Take off,” Jesus says. “Your faith has saved you, seswken se. ” And immediately—no double pass needed, no big sighs of any kind, no touching, no spitting—immediately he sees again. What’s the proof that he’s seeing, as in truly seeing with the kind of sight that Mark is finally all about? Answer: he follows J. on the way, en tee hodw. The road to Jerusalem, that is. The road to the great aggravating of the powers that be. The road to being punished, the road to being crushed. The way of the cross, as many will call it.
40. What a contrast of course to those other disciples, my kind and your kind. That bunch has been on the way since 8:27. Flip back to that verse, take a look. En tee hodw, away from the sea, Jesus springs the big question—it’s the first time he’s brought it up: “Who am I, do you think?” The Christ, says Peter, 8:29. So what does it mean that he is the Christ? What follows is a period of specific instruction in that very topic, a narrower, more focused topic than they got in the prior term of disciple-school. To use that other metaphor, this is double-pass time for this initial set of disciples. Up go Jesus’ sleeves and he gets down to work on opening ears and eyes.
41. 8:31, the first Passion prediction. (By the way, the passion predictions are easy to track in Mark. Note where they occur: 8:31, 9:31, 10:32). Immediately comes the first bad reaction, Peter attempting to call J. on the carpet. 8:34, Jesus’ first clear declaration that sticking with him means getting it in the neck, though the payoff will be grand. Life-losers will be life-savers.
42. 9:2 special lesson time for Peter, James, and John, on the Mount of Transfiguration. Notice, please, how eyes and ears come into play. v. 7, “Listen to him,” the voice says; v. 8, they looked and saw Jesus only, J. who is

turning Moses and Elijah into yesterday's news, as in, if you want to know what's finally on God's mind listen to Jesus, see J. only. What does that mean for us today? That's what all of us are here at this conference to talk about. The point for now: to make sure we're clear on what the subject is, and what it isn't.

43. 9:14-29, the episode of the stubborn demon, featuring that father already mentioned, the one who screams the prayer that all disciples ought to scream. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief!" For their part, the disciples are still too dense to imagine that prayer, let alone to scream it.
44. 9:31, again a passion prediction and again, v. 32, a bad reaction. The disciples don't get it, eegnousin, and they're afraid to ask. Did I mention that J. got very testy in that stubborn demon incident, v. 19? No wonder the boys are skittish about asking him things.
45. 9:33, it's a typical guy thing that, being clueless and afraid, you change the subject. So shuffling behind J. the disciples chatter on the road—yes, that en-route-to-Jerusalem road, of all places—about who's the greatest. When J. calls them on it, they're scared to fess up. 9:36, a lesson about the greatest/least thing, complete with a living prop, a little child taken in up in Jesus' arms so the disciples won't just hear, they'll also see the point he means to make.
46. 9:42 and following, proof that even modern translators are struggling with this hearing/seeing thing. John has wanted to know if they "done good" when they told a stranger to quit using Jesus' name to cast out demons. "Sorry," says Jesus, bad move. And then, v. 42, whoever skandalidzee, i.e. scandalizes one of these wee ones who believes in me…. What does that mean? The old RSV renders, whoever causes one of them to "sin." Yet that's precisely what it cannot mean, not if "sin" is understood the way the wee

ones always understand it, i.e. as a violation of God's Moses word. But then no wonder a wee one will wind up a lifetime of churchgoing worrying on her deathbed about whether God will let her in. Now that would be a little one who has been scandalized en tee hodo, on the road, the consequence being that she's broken faith in Jesus. She doesn't trust him. She doesn't see his arms embracing her in the blessed sacrament, she doesn't hear him saying, 'Don't be afraid, the storm of death won't make you perish, nor will your sin, and just by the way, to hell with the devil, don't worry about him. To scandalize a little one is to break her faith in Jesus and to shift her eyes and ears back to Moses and Elijah. Woe to the wretch who does that to her, not least the one who phrased the English in the Bible she read her whole life long. Double woe to the wretches—and they fill the church these days, always have, always will—who define discipleship in legal or prophetic terms. "You're a Christian if you…" —fill in the blank with whatever version of orthodoxy or orthopraxis the speaker is touting, and they all do it, from the left as well as from the right, from Higgins Rd. as well as Lindbergh Blvd. Shame on them all. What matters is whether at day's end you're counting on J. and only J. to save you. Woe to the one who destroys that trust.

47. Chapter 10, some Pharisees, model non-trusters, look to Moses to pull their fat from the fire of a lousy marriage and they expect J. to nod his head to that. He doesn't. 10:13, little children, trusters par excellence, get scooped up in the arms of J. who grooves on trusters, but that happens only after J. has to bark again at gate-keeping disciples who still don't get it. 10:23-31, the rich guy who can't bear to follow J. because it would cost too much. I wish we had time to dig into this further we simply don't. 10:26, the disciples, exceedingly

astonished, are unable to imagine how a camel can be squeezed through the eye of a needle. All this time they've been tagging after J. and haven't they been watching? Why still so deaf that they dare to brag, as Peter does, v. 28, about them doing what the rich guy didn't? 10:32, again they're on the road, but they're not happy trudgers. They're freaking out again. They're being afraid. Again, palin, Jesus takes the twelve aside and again explains what's going to happen when they get to Jerusalem, 3rd prediction, as we say. Of course it falls on deaf ears. Again. 10:35-44, James and John are making asses of themselves over who gets to sit where when Jesus is running the show; in v. 41 the others join the folly. For them this is the second such argument in just this movement; the last was in chapter 9, hard on the heels of the second prediction. 10:42, again J. explains, again, again and yet again. And still today the wrangling goes on over which disciple, which faction of disciples, will control the agenda in the church of Jesus Christ. Can you hear J. grinding his teeth?

48. 10:46, we're back to Bart, dear Bartimaeus, dirty, smelly, pushy, annoying, loud, rude, and obnoxious. And for Christ our Lord, a breath of fresh air. Finally, a true disciple. The last is first, the least is greatest, and that's how it works in the kingdom of God. Bartimaeus is the hero of Mark's Gospel as Thomas is of John's Gospel. He is the model disciple. He sees and grasps; he hears and understands. Other little ones have done the same along the way with as much panache, though truth be told, perhaps it's simply desperation, the thing that drives the Greek woman to argue over bread crumbs, or the bleeding woman to sneak a touch, or those loutish young men to tear a hole through a roof so they can get their pal to Jesus. All these get praised, and what they seek gets done for

them through a faith that isn’t a feeling, still less a propositional system. It’s merely the thing that fixes eyes and ears on J. passing by and says “give me what I need to live as you alone can give it,” and when it gets the gift it follows blithely down the road on Jesus’ heels, and it is not afraid nor is it amazed.

49. As for us, as for our churches: if we’re sick to death of being blind and deaf, or of sweating fruitlessly with others who are, then Bartimaeus sits here-thanks to Mark, thanks to the Holy Spirit moving Mark– as the model of what to do. Ask, beg, demand of Jesus the faith in him that he so badly wants to give us, said faith known otherwise as open eyes, open ears, and a heart to stick with him no matter what. And if there’s any doubt at all that we need to stick with him, well, it’s on to the next episode.
50. The Sea and the Road are long behind us. Now we’re at the climax of the Temple Movement. 12:38–13:2–38As he taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.’41He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’

13:1As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples
said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what
large buildings!’ 2Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these
great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon
another; all will be thrown down.’

51. A few opening questions—
    a. Who has heard a stewardship sermon preached on this text? [All hands go up. Of course they do.]
    b. What point, pray tell, did the preacher try to milk from it?
    c. Why in all honesty was the preacher making that point?
    d. One final question: look at the pericope itself. What’s your opinion of Jesus and the role he plays in this pericope?
52. True confessions, Burce getting personal: I’ve used this story for the stewardship shtick once, maybe twice. I can’t remember when. I gave up on doing that a long time ago.
53. Number one, it’s bogus. If the point is “make like the widow, toss it all in” we’re telling lies when we peddle it. Truth is, we expect no one to do that. No honest, thoughtful Christian ever has. Instead we expect each other to put food in our children’s bellies and a roof over their heads. We rejoice when someone spends money on an overdue vacation, and if we don’t, we’re jerks.
54. Number two, this story makes me angry. What’s with a system that drives this woman to toss her last penny in the pot—and now what? Does she crawl into the corner of a Jerusalem alley and lie down there to die? I should add that this story makes me angry also with Jesus. What’s with him, that he simply stands there watching, without the slightest hint whatsoever of coming to the widow’s

aid?

55. A third reason for hating this story, especially as a stewardship text. It leaves me writhing with a bad conscience. I know about religious institutions. There's one in Cleveland, Ohio, I'm supposed to be running. We need money to do that. We need the faithful filling the plate. The light and heating bills are ever due. And so is my paycheck. I tell them to give to the glory of God. Never once have I confessed that other thought at the back of my mind, that if they still want a pastor six months from now they had better pony up.
56. Give till it hurts. We're supposed to say that. Give it all up and follow me. Jesus said that to the rich guy, chapter 10, prior movement. But I won't say that. I wouldn't do it myself. My wife wouldn't let me. Hey, I'm Old Adam too, so I blame it on her. Then like a drowning man I grasp for the10% rule that Moses put in place, and even then I struggle keeping up with it. And to ram it down the throats of others seems always so damnably self-serving.
57. Welcome to the horror of the institution, above all the institutions that God himself has set up both to mediate and secure his gracious presence on earth, and it doesn't much matter how the mediating gets done, whether through sacrifice or through word and sacrament. In either case the institution itself will bring our sin to the fore and aggravate it. And at day's end we're left bitterly at odds with God, and God with us.
58. And God in his painful mercy has seen fit to do something about that. That's been the driving theme of the current Temple Movement. Those who serve institutions that serve God need to be purged of the sin that piles up as they run them and even more as they corrupt them (again, cf. Malachi 3). The temple must be cleansed. So must the

institutions of the church. As some like to say it, ecclesia semper reformanda est [i.e. the Church needs constant reforming]. And the time will come when the institution itself has got to be torn down for having failed to do what God himself established it to do.

59. Mark doesn't use the word "sin" in this or any of the other main movements. I've already observed that. Instead he shows the effects and consequence of sin through Jesus' eyes. In the Temple Movement these are the eyes of the judge, Malachi's messenger who is more than a messenger. He is God himself in the person of Jesus, God's Son, though no one in this movement will see it, least of all the top dogs who ought to be canny enough to know a messenger of God when one rolls into town. They don't, of course. They're blind, they're deaf; as blind and deaf as anyone can ever be. Again like the rich man, chapter 10, they have lots and lots to lose. Paul Jaster does a splendid job of summarizing the political, social, and economic factors that enter into this particular piece of the narrative (ThTheol #712). You'll be enlightened.
60. In 11:15 Jesus launches his Malachian mission within the temple preincts. He knows in advance what he'll find, and how he'll deal with it. The signal of that is his cursing of the fig tree on the way to work that Monday morning (11:12-14).
61. What he finds is a temple that fails to function as God meant it to do. A market operates in the space designated for any Gentiles who have their wits sufficiently together to come there to pray. These Gentiles, the nations, are now excluded. In goes Jesus to do to the traders as he's been doing to the demons, and yes, the verb is exballw, he drives them out. There follows a scathing indictment. The clean is unclean. Robbers are running what ought to be a house of prayer (v. 17). With that the big shots plot to

kill their judge (v. 18).

62. 11:20. In a conversation about the withered fig tree J. tells his disciples that they can tackle institutional mountains too. But in doing that, forgive those who wrong you, he says, v. 25. Operate as he will-that's the implication.
63. 11:27 to 12:37, debates with the big shots in their several factions, none of whom can see that it's high time for them to repent into the forgiveness of sins, else their jig is up.
64. Back now to our core text. It has one function only, to explain again why the jig is up both for the institution itself and for those who run it. "Beware the scribes," v. 38. They prance around. They hanker for status, as if serving God isn't status enough. They grub for money. This incredible line, "they devour widow's houses," v. 40. Comes now a widow, v. 41, whose house has been devoured. That's the implication. So watch, please, as this institution and the folks who run it in the name of God gobble up her last red cent. No one sees this, or if they do, no one cares. After all, she's just a widow, another pesky Bartimaeus type. But there sits the judge. He spots it. He makes a special point, v. 43, of telling the disciples what's going on. And still, 13:1, the eyes aren't seeing, the ears aren't hearing. "Look, says one, "such whacking great stones, such fabulous buildings, ain't it all so grand." More confession: that's the sort of thing I tend to say every time I visit the son who lives in Manhattan. The judge's answer. "It's all coming down. For the widow's sake, for God's sake, it has to." End of episode, end of movement. 13:2, not 12:44 where, in our own blindness, we usually quit reading.
65. I've got some questions. Why do we quit reading there, at 12:44, and all the church as well, not least the

translators who always insist on cutting 13:1 & 2 away from the unit it clearly belongs to? Why do we work so hard to look on the widow with admiration and not with pity? Why have Christian preachers forever twisted this into a phony object lesson about forking over the cash? And if we look at the story squarely, with honesty, why are we scared to fess up to the feelings it has got to stir about J. passivity as he stands there looking on? Have you never once been astounded by that? Or if so, are you afraid to fess up to it? Do you still think Jesus can't handle it? If so, have your eyes, your ears been open as you trotted after him on the road just now?

66. It's our turn to start screaming, "Lord we believe. Help thou our unbelief" (9:24). But what keeps us from that? Like those first disciples, are we still entertaining the possibility that J. won't come through for us? Really, do we think that? Shame on us if so (8:38).
67. No wonder J. has got to die. More on that in the next session.

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