

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus

Mark 10:46-52

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,

1. The Gospel appointed in the RCL for next Sunday, Pentecost 23 (October 26), is Mark 10:46-52, The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus. By now for some of you a Crossings matrix for this text will be a piece of cake. Nevertheless I'll give you my version.
2. A second item is a book review—done without some book review editor requesting it. So if there is such a “requester” out there, you have my Email address above.

Peace & Joy! Ed

I. A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 10:46-52

PROLEGOMENA

1. The Greek term “ochlos” is here again in the first verse of the text. Manifoldly marginated among such ochlos is Bartimaeus, both blind and reduced to begging.

2. Twice he calls on Jesus with the words: “Jesus, Son of David, be merciful to me.” By my quick check this is the only instance in Mark where a request for help comes with the honorific title “Son of David.” I hear Mark here not hyping the Messianic angle on this title, but the Davidic Covenant angle ala II Sam. 7. There in II Samuel the Good News is that sons of David (contrary to Sinai covenant connections) have a “chesedh” (==mercy, forgiveness, steadfast love) link with Yahweh irrespective of their record vis-a-vis God’s law. Thus this plea for mercy linked to Jesus’s own Davidic (covenant) linkage is, I think, what Mark wants us to note.
3. This plea comes here from one who is manifoldly ochlos, manifoldly marginated. But he is someone who heard somewhere that Jesus is dispensing God’s mercy in a Davidic covenant way. Even before he ever meets Jesus, he has “faith” in him as such a Davidic mercy-Messiah. That faith, as in all the other synoptic pericopes where “faith heals,” where “faith saves,” has two elements. One is that Jesus has the authority to do such saving/healing, and secondly that Jesus will indeed use that authority for the suppliant. That sort of faith heals, saves.
4. Both Matthew and Luke present this pericope with some differences, but I can find no important weight to those textual variations. If you can, tell me.

A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 10:46-52

DIAGNOSIS:

STAGE 1

Bartimaeus’ desperate situation. Marginated in many ways. More “ochlos” you can not get.

STAGE 2

He is urged not to believe that Jesus is for him by voices in the group who tell him to cease and desist his petition. Tho he believes that Jesus is for him, the hearts of his critics “believe” that Jesus is not for such a multiply-marginated outsider. They urge him to believe the same thing.

STAGE 3

Were he to follow their counsel, he would never be healed, never be on the receiving end of Jesus calling him.

A NEW PROGNOSIS

STAGE 4

The ochlos Messiah is precisely there for Bartimaeus – types. Finally he is really there only for those who know they are blind and beggars vis-a-vis God. But as always in Mark, when Jesus assumes the roll of ochlos-Messiah, one who is “for” such folks, he assumes the way to the cross as well in order to fulfill such a Davidic-mercy covenant. Yet that total mercy of the ochlos Messiah “heals and saves.”

STAGE 5

“Cheer up, he calls for you.” Bartimaeus’ response to follow the call: “faith.” He trusts Jesus in two ways as mentioned above in the prolegomena.

STAGE 6

Now healed, now seeing, he “follows him on the way.” Mark’s words to us the readers are: Go and do likewise.

II. BOOK REVIEW

Albert Nolan, *JESUS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, Fifth Printing 1996, xi, 196 pp. paper.

The Oct. 1997 issue of THE LUTHERAN, national magazine of the ELCA, hypes the “breathtaking speed – with no debate – [whereby the ELCA August, 1997] assembly adopted a historic declaration stating that ‘a consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutheran and Roman Catholics.’” Only 25 delegates of the 1000 voting said “nay.” The deed was done. To signal the era of ecumenical good feeling at the assembly, it was Roman Catholic veteran ecumenical officer Jeffrey Gros of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops who had presented the document to the assembly. After its adoption Gros said he “fully expects the joint declaration will be part of official Catholic teaching.” At the Roman headquarters, too, the Vatican’s chief ecumenical officer, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, said Gros, indicated that Rome may approve the document “by 1998 or certainly by the end of the century.”

No doubt about it, consensus today on the issue that split the Western church in the 16th century is a big deal. But that doesn’t yet say that justification itself is a big deal for today’s rank and file Roman Catholics—or rank and file Lutherans either. It never gets mentioned in Albert Nolan’s book, JESUS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY. Since it’s already in its fifth printing, his book must be getting quite a hearing. From other sources I know that Nolan represents a big slice of today’s Roman Catholicism, who really couldn’t care less about justification itself, let alone any historic agreements on the matter. And some Lutherans aren’t far behind. In conferences with Lutheran pastors I’m no longer surprised to see folks yawn—maybe with a twinge of guilt—when justification gets mentioned. And even worse, their jaws are in danger of locking if the term appears in its full 16th century garb: “justification by faith alone.”

Lutheran ennui about justification is another topic deserving its own treatment. Here in Nolan's book is documentation from the Roman side. Nolan wants us to see Jesus "before he became an object of Christian faith," that is, Jesus as he really was before church praxis and doctrinal concerns blurred the picture. That Jesus, says Nolan, is silent on the subject of God justifying sinners through faith—or through any other medium. It does not concern him.

So what does Nolan's Jesus Before Christianity look like if justifying sinners is not on his agenda? In this review I propose to a) describe Nolan's portrait of the real Jesus and b) then show why it is inadequate even for the scaled-down job-description that Nolan ascribes to him.

Albert Nolan is an accomplished RC theologian, a knowledgeable New Testament scholar. He offers a number of compelling reconstructions of Jesus in the midst of Judaism in first century Palestine. And every now and then he comes up with assides that also captivate. E.g., Why is hell portrayed as a place "where their worm does not die, neither are the flames quenched?" Simple, when you remember that the Jerusalem garbage dump, Gehenna, the foulest place imaginable, was exactly that: everything tossed into that pit disintegrated, because the composting worms and the smouldering fires never stopped doing their work.

But what amazes me is that Nolan seems not to know what "everybody" in today's NT scholarship knows, that in the last 200 years there have been scores of attempts to get back to Jesus as he was before church politics and theological conflicts confused the original portrait, putting smoke and mirrors before our eyes. The last time I looked it was still consensus among NT scholars that the so-called Leben Jesu movement was a failure. In attempting to find the Jesus of history, as distinguished

from the Christ of later theology, what every author produced was a Jesus whose character and theology bore a striking resemblance to that of the author. Instead of actually getting to Jesus, “wie er leibte und lebte” as the German phrase goes) [what he was like in the flesh and how he actually lived], what we got in each new Life of Jesus was a picture of how the author wished Jesus and his theology had been. And of course that picture too can be documented with NT texts aplenty.

Albert Nolan has produced one more Leben Jesu for the bookshelves. He calls it Jesus Before Christianity. Intending no disrespect, I must say that what we really have in his book is Jesus After Nolan’s Christianity. And what does Nolan’s Jesus look like? Here are some particulars.

1. John the Baptist and Jesus both focus on the impending catastrophe awaiting Israel, which did indeed occur in 70 A.D. Their responses, however, differ. John, the dour prophet, calls for repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins if the catastrophe is to be averted. Jesus, more joyful, announces that the Kingdom of God is here and at its core are compassion and faith, a compassion and faith he himself models [wie er leibte und lebte]. Even though the move to compassion and faith is like being born again, his invitation is simple: join up and the catastrophe will be averted. But what about John’s concerns, sin and repentance and baptism and forgiveness—all of them items on the justification agenda? Jesus offers a second opinion about that, says Nolan. All Jews knew sins as “debts owed to God.” Forgiveness in that paradigm was “cancellation and remission of one’s debt to God.” How did Jesus address the issue? In his friendship with sinners “Jesus overlooked their past, treated them as people no longer, if ever, [emphasis added] indebted to God and therefore no longer deserving of rejection and

punishment. They were forgiven.” As Nolan reads the classic text in Matthew 9 [forgiveness and healing of the paralytic], “anyone with sufficient faith could forgive sins. By his very presence Jesus liberated sinners.” So is forgiveness of sins a big deal or not? Do sinners really need to be justified before God, or was that just John the Baptist’s opinion, while Jesus thought and acted differently?

2. At the center of the Kingdom are compassion and faith. They avert catastrophe. Just what do those two words mean in the theology of Jesus after Nolan? First off, forgiveness and faith were diametrically opposed to the idolatries of power, prestige and possessions that oppressed people from both the inside and the outside in the world of Jesus’ day. Nolan makes a point that our world today is exactly the same, except that now the evil malady is wall-to-wall over the whole planet.
3. The parables Jesus tells and his one-on-one interaction with the oppressed portray what compassion is. The classic example, of course, is the parable misnamed The Prodigal Son. The parable shows God as the compassionate father, and it is Jesus’ own trust in God’s compassionate fathering of him that empowers him in everything he does. The parable shows that “if ever” God was “intent upon punishing sinners... God has relented and now wants to save sinners. God has changed. The prodigal father is moved by compassion to a change of mind and to do something new.”
4. And what is faith, faith in God? Nolan notes that Jesus mentions the word God “only very infrequently,” because for Jesus “the almighty power that achieves the impossible is faith [emphasis in the original]. Faith releases in us a power that is beyond us.” (p.100) Much more than that God is not. Since the Kingdom is all about compassion, “faith is a straightforward decision in favor of the

Kingdom of God, a radical reorientation of one's life, a decision deriving its power from the truth of what is believed." Thus "the power of faith is the power of truth." True faith is not possible without compassion. Faith expanded to its cosmic dimension is "to believe that goodness is more powerful than evil, and truth is stronger than falsehood," that in the end goodness and truth will triumph over evil and falsehood.

5. Both John and Jesus saw catastrophe coming and made two different proposals for how to avert it. John called for radical repentance and a baptism for forgiveness. Jesus said receive the Kingdom. In both cases people did not, so catastrophe came. After Jesus' own catastrophe at Calvary, his disciples adapted his words to their new situation. That adaptation became "faith in Jesus." Christians today still say that. What they mean is that Jesus determines for Christians what God is, namely, deus humanissimus (God humanified to the nth degree), as Schillebeeckx puts it. But the substance of their faith and Jesus' own faith is the same. "To believe in Jesus is to believe that goodness can and will triumph over evil." This adds the aspect of hope and expands compassion and faith into the classical Christian triad of "faith, hope, and love," which has its own even more ancient corollary in "truth, goodness, and beauty."
6. But what makes compassion redemptive? "Compassion destroys the suffering of others by suffering with and on behalf of those who suffer." Jesus before Christianity was not interested in resurrection, not even his own. His three passion and resurrection predictions are the reformulations of the faithful, who reworded the power of compassion and truth coming from his atoning and redemptive death. Dying in "faith and compassion" is itself life-giving.

Lou Murphy, a Roman Catholic colleague from Crossings classes and just this spring an Augsburg Confession class [where justification is THE issue], gave me this book with a handwritten note "Nolan reminded me of you." I wonder what Lou saw in the two of us that suggested connection. When I get back to St. Louis I'll have to ask him what he meant. Because of Lou's commendation I read Nolan through twice, taking notes, and it seems simple to me: Either the confessors at Augsburg are right about the "real" Jesus of the N.T. and the real Jesus needed for the life of the world, or Nolan is. But they can't both be.

The confessors at Augsburg criticized the scholastic theology of their day for doing the same thing Nolan does—under-diagnosing the malady of the patient, and therefore proposing a "smaller" Savior than the N.T. proposes in the crucified and risen Jesus. Nolan doesn't see sin as such a big deal. Maybe it never was, he hints with his "if ever." If sinners have no real problem when facing God, then Nolan's Jesus will suffice. But if God's own "law of sin and death" really is a sinner's inescapable nemesis, then Nolan's Jesus just won't do. If justifying sinners into life is indeed the fundamental good news of Jesus, to avert their being justified to death as God "counts trespasses," then Nolan's Jesus is too tame, not radical enough, still a rookie in the bush-leagues.

But I'll venture a step farther. I don't think Nolan's Jesus is even big enough to fulfill the restricted salvation agenda Nolan proposes for him. I'm teaching in Lithuania right now. The older of my students, and the parents of all of them have seen truth and goodness go down the drain, not conquering, but being conquered. And not just once, but three times in just half a decade, the 5-year sequence of 1940-45. In 1940 the Russians annexed the Baltic countries, and anybody who was somebody was either shot on the spot or sent to the Gulag. In 1941, a year later, Hitler came in and Nazi terror with its slave labor

and/or death camps, not only for Jews, made short shrift of truth and goodness. Three years later the Russians came back and another 200,000 Lithuanians disappeared. So much for truth and compassion. Christian faith here has to mean something else than the conviction that truth and compassion will eventually triumph. If I read my students right, they believe in God and his Christ alongside their head-knowledge conviction that truth and compassion will always lose. They need a better Jesus than Nolan's. Even though I'm tongue-tied in the Lithuanian language, I pick up signals: Christians here know that they've got one.

Back once more to justification. The larger theological blueprint that Nolan is working from has no space to sketch in sinners' serious trouble with God. They may think that they are in trouble with God. Their institutions, secular and sacred, may brainwash them into such self-perceptions, but God "if ever," is surely not now any nemesis for them. Since that was already true as Jesus appeared on the scene, all that theology of the cross, not just in St. Paul, but equally prominent in St. John and hardly absent in the synoptics, is not present in the real Jesus, Jesus before Christianity. If that is so, isn't Paul's painful conclusion about his Galatian critics also true of Nolan's Jesus? Namely, if what you say is true, then Jesus died in vain.

Now, of course, Nolan would say Jesus did not die in vain. He died in the confidence typologized in Isaiah's suffering servant. There dying for compassion and in faith is already atoning and redemptive. But where the redemptive benefit occurs is ostensibly in the soul of the survivors, not in any change in their de facto relationship with God. Nolan's is a modern (or is it ancient?) mix of theism and atheism. He has no problem believing in the transcendent power of compassion and faith, but he can't believe in a God who holds the human race accountable in any serious way. But then doesn't the courtroom scene with

our primal parents in Genesis 3 have to be rewritten? And was the Baptist just plain mistaken in claiming that forgiveness of sins was indeed a big deal? And do the Gospels ever ground a sinner's forgiveness in the mere "presence" of Jesus? Do any of the four evangelists ever depart from what every Jew-Jesus included-knew: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins"? Ergo, if you go around telling people they are forgiven, you (or somebody) are going to have to give a life to make it stick.

Harvey Cox has a kudo on the book's cover: "The most accurate and balanced short reconstruction of the life of the historical Jesus." If Harvey's right, we're still in trouble. Or as Paul might put it, (I Cor 15) if that's the real Jesus, "we're still stuck in our sins."

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