

Proper 25B: Mark 10.46-52

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The Rev. Scott Walters

In the Greek speaking world, when the gospel of Mark was written down, there was a particular description of the universe that almost everything else rested upon. It was laid out in one of Plato's dialogues several centuries before the birth of Jesus. It told the story of how the heavens came to be, how human beings were made, what the nature and order of created things really are. Among the educated people in the Hellenistic world, it was the most read work, after Homer, in Greek, and has had, according to one scholar, "the longest continuous influence of any of the dialogues of the West." It affected what almost everybody in Plato's world thought about the shape of the cosmos for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years, to a certain degree.

But, you should know, Plato's universe was a carefully stratified place with a clear hierarchy, from the highest realm of pure forms, down through the less perfect physical world. There was the Demiurge, or creator, who created and instructed the gods to make human souls. They did so out of leftover, lower grade parts from the world-soul. And these sad, malfunctioning bodies we have to carry those souls around in? Well, obviously they're the work of lesser gods yet. The point being that some things are higher orders of being in this cosmology and some things are very, very low. And that's just the way it is. Some things just matter more.

I'm sorry. You didn't come for a lesson in Greek philosophy. And I'm hoping the people in this room who actually know something about such things will correct whatever I've naively maligned in dear old Plato at coffee hour, if you're still interested by then. I'm lifting most of this from a book by a liturgical scholar named Gordon Lathrop. But it gets interesting right about here. At least it did for me.

You see, according to Plato, human beings were not created equal either. Not at all. He thought women, for instance, were just recycled cowardly males. Men were a higher order. And among men, one order was the highest of all: the philosopher. I know. It was a rather self serving move. But there you have it.

The dome of the philosopher's head was a little replica of the dome of the heavens. And he was the rare, enlightened kind of person who could take in the universe through his senses and actually understand it. Only the philosopher had the capacity to order the cosmos rightly in his mind so that he could choose the good life and live well. And one sense was far more important than any other. One sense was crucial to his understanding: the sense of sight.

To be an ordinary man, much less a woman, was to be blind. And in Plato's universe, the literally and metaphorically blind were simply lesser beings. "Those [gifts

of sight] that are lesser," he wrote, "why should we [sing of] them here? Those very gifts, even if they are lamented with wailing by the blind person who is not a philosopher are certainly lamented in vain!" Sorry there, blind, ordinary human being. You're wasting your time even lamenting that you can't see. That's just the way it is. Get over it. You're just not all that important.

Oh wait. I've been rambling on quite a while now, and haven't mentioned the title of Plato's dialogue, have I? Its title is the name of its main character, the enlightened philosopher who sees everything, understands the structure of the cosmos, and is wise enough to choose the good life. His name was Timaeus.

"As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside."

We took a while to get here this morning. "Here" being the actual gospel lesson we're supposedly considering. But this may be a story that needs a little setup. You don't read a story about, say, someone named "son of Einstein" and not wonder whether that name might be about more than keeping the offspring sorted out.

"As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside."

Bar-Timaeus. Bar, you may know, means "son" in Hebrew. But Timaeus isn't a Hebrew name. It's Greek. Something's up. And if you're still not quite convinced this detail might matter, consider that of all the people Jesus heals in the book of Mark, there is only one whose name we are given: Bartimaeus.

Consider also that this healing sits right where the story turns from Jesus's teaching and healing ministry in Galilee, and heads toward Jerusalem and the cross. It's at this pivotal moment that Jesus stops, and helps the son of Timaeus regain his sight.

Bartimaeus, of course, is the perfect inverse of Plato's Timaeus. He is not the wise, all seeing, enlightened philosopher, free to choose the good. Bartimaeus is blind. Sitting by the road. Begging for mercy from a man he'd heard might be able to make him well. Bartimaeus doesn't even have enough shame to shut up when the people around him try to quiet him down. He is everything, in other words, that Timaeus is not. He is someone whose life, in Plato's universe, amounts to almost nothing.

To feel the force of a story like this one, we need to reenter the Hellenistic world, which Jesus lived in as well, in a way. We need to inhabit a world — and I realize this will be quite a stretch for us — we need to imagine a world in which the person who is wise and who can see and who can choose the good life is the person that God or the gods are most pleased with. A person of a different strata and order of being than one who sits and sees nothing. Someone who's only hope is mercy.

When we enter that world, which maybe isn't as different from ours as we'd like to believe, this story tells itself. Jesus stops. He inverts the cosmos, not only by noticing

and reaching out to a blind beggar as if he were someone who actually mattered. He says to the man, as his sight is restored, "Go; your faith has made you well."

Did you notice that? Jesus doesn't say, "I had pity on you, you poor outcast creature. And so I healed you." No. He says, "Your faith, Bartimaeus, something within you, is what made you well today." Maybe Bartimaeus's sight wasn't something Jesus imparted on him, but something already alive within him that Jesus somehow gave him access to again. "Go, son of Timaeus. Your faith has made you well."

What might have given Jesus eyes to see Bartimaeus as a human brother of the highest order? You'd be right to point out that Jesus's people had a problematic creation account that they lived by as well, as do we Christians. It's a story that has also been used to make women into lesser beings, gullible temptresses, vulnerable to the arguments of crafty serpents, and much worse. How we read and tell our stories matters too, and even our most sacred ones can be used to do harm rather than heal. If Timaeus is the creation account you're trying to live well by, I'm afraid you'll need to find someone to guide you toward its deeper wisdom other than a preacher who read one Lutheran's take on it and now fancies himself an expert in Platonic cosmology.

What I do believe is that what we believe in our bones about the created order of things still matters to the way we inhabit these cosmos every day. And the truth it seems like Jesus was accessing in his own tradition was that creation is a radical, gratuitous gift of a loving God. A creator, who did not make a stratified universe, but one who pronounced each aspect of the created order good from the very beginning. The light and the darkness, the dome of sky and the waters below it, the land and the seas and the plants yielding seeds of every kind, God saw these for what they were and announced that they were good. So were the swarms of living creatures, from the birds of the air to the monsters of the sea. God blessed them and told them to multiply, to make even more of their goodness. Same for cattle and creeping things and wild animals of every kind. Same for us. For humankind. "I see your goodness," God says before anything is disrupted or suffers damage in the wild freedom God also entrusted to it all. Before things become stratified, alienated, estranged, at odds, they are each declared unequivocally, unambiguously good in Jesus's cosmos.

Jesus's tradition also had an account of how things went wrong. An account of how much damage good creatures can do to one another when we forget our original blessedness. Damage that blind Bartimaeus must have suffered every day, and which might have led him to believe that his damaged and diminished self was just part of the way things were created to be. One cosmic story he lived within said he was a lower order of being, after all. Jesus met this son of Timaeus on the road and invited him into a different story about the way things are, and helped him regain access to a healing, original goodness Bartimaeus still carried within himself as he did.

"There lives the dearest freshness deep down things..." is how a priest named Gerard Manly Hopkins would tell the story Jesus still invites us to into. When we baptize

a child or a fully grown human being, we acknowledge out loud that we are all still being formed by a false story of a stratified cosmos all the time. Our baptismal promise is to renounce those powers and that story and try to live as a community of Jesus's people who trust in the dear, original freshness deep down all things, and, in whoever we meet and in whatever ways we can, bring it to the surface of our own lives and of the lives of those around us.

What we believe about the created order matters to the way we inhabit the world every day of our lives. What story do you live by? What story tells you of the way things are and how they were meant to be? What healing in ourselves and in our world might result if we, like a son of Timaeus on the roadside one day, walked away from all the false and lesser stories and into the good and blessed cosmos of Jesus?