

The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time 27 October 2101

In Jesus' day, people who were down-and-out on their luck and begged for money as their primary means of survival spread out their cloaks in high-traffic areas and then perched themselves on their cloaks for two very practical reasons.

First, the cloak separated a beggar from the dirt and grime. Even if poor and needy, who among us would ever want to sit upon dirt and grime all day long?

Second, spreading out a cloak made it easy for a beggar to gather up the coins tossed one's way by the people who were passing by. Periodically picking up the edges of one's cloak and gathering up the coins made counting a pretty easy task...and made it more difficult for others to steal one's coins.

Beggars—like Bartimaeus—routinely set up shop along the dirty and grimy road that ran from Jericho to Jerusalem. Their hope was to benefit from the largess of those people who were making a pilgrimage to the holy city. Perhaps those pilgrims might toss a few of their extra coins in direction of the beggars.

When Bartimaeus—whose name has a double meaning, “Son of Defilement” (its Aramaic meaning) and “Son of Honor and Dignity” (its Greek meaning)—cast aside his cloak, Bartimaeus was signaling to Jesus that he had come to and made a momentous, life-changing decision. He was abandoning his current way of life—living as a “Son of Defilement” who was completely dependent upon the generosity of others—and, by accepting Jesus' teaching, would now live as a “Son of Honor and Dignity” whose prime motivation would no longer include living off the generosity of other people. That is, Bartimaeus decided he was now going to give others from the riches of God's love he now possessed in abundance. In contrast to those who were making a pilgrimage from Jericho to Jerusalem, Bartimaeus' motive would be neither self-interest nor pity, but the riches of charity alive in his soul

that Bartimaeus would express by loving God and neighbor as he loved himself.

Like Bartimaeus, all of us have made choices in our lives that have defiled us, to the point that we figuratively spread out our cloaks and take our place on the dirty and grimy roadside of daily life. There we sit, hours, days, and weeks on end, waiting for others to pass us by and perhaps be generous enough to toss a few of their extra coins our way. Then, after gathering those coins, we go home and survive on what those coins can purchase until we go out again and beg for more coins.

Sounds like the grind of a job, no?

This conversion of Bartimaeus from a “Son of Defilement” to a “Son of Honor and Dignity” presents our young people—and all of those of us who are young at heart—a tremendous challenge with the 2012 holiday season being just around the corner. In fact, the countdown clock indicates that it’s just 57 days until Christmas, 42 days until the first Sunday of Advent, 40 days until “Black Friday,” the first “official” day of shopping for Christmas, and 39 days until Thanksgiving.

Remember last year, when we had approximately the same number of days to wait for the holiday season to arrive? Remember the gifts you longed to receive on Christmas day, if only your parents and grandparents would throw a few of their extra coins your way? And, having received the gifts you so longed for, did they deliver the abiding happiness this past year you thought they would bring?

Quite likely not.

Some of our young people actually are longing for replacement gifts which they believe are sure will provide the happiness that last year’s gifts failed to deliver.

See how easy it is to defile ourselves, falsely believing that our true happiness is to be found in material things than in loving God and neighbor as we love ourselves? We become so defiled that our focus is solely upon receiving rather than giving. See how easy it also is for us to turn the gift of Christmas—God the Father giving His only begotten Son to us in the flesh—into a glorification of things and of ourselves?

And it's not just our young people who have allowed themselves to be defiled by the culture of such crass secularism, consumerism, and materialism. It's also happened to many parents and grandparents.

As we're all probably aware, retailers have already begun decorating their stores for Christmas. All sorts of Christmas goodies are on display. In fact, those retailers report that customers are streaming into their stores in larger numbers and much earlier than in previous years.

Why so early this year?

It appears that Christmas shoppers want to put their choicest of morsels on what used to be called "lay away." In this way, the retailers will hold those gifts until these customers come up with the cash they need to pay for them. Evidently, many shoppers are fearful that if they wait until they come up with the cash to purchase those choicest morsels, the retailers' shelves will be empty and then there will be great wailing and gnashing of teeth come Christmas day.

In light of today's gospel, think about this curious behavior: These parents and grandparents have decided that providing what others want for Christmas is such a high priority in their lives that they have planned with exacting care to ensure they will purchase all of those choicest of morsels. These parents and grandparents think all of those material things that their children and grandchildren so desperately want are so extremely important that the desire to give them everything they want now consumes those who should know better or, at least, claim to know better.

Yes, indeed! Consider all the disappointment and heartbreak if their children and grandchildren don't receive everything they want come Christmas morning!

So, because these generous people are currently a little short on cash and want to avoid causing all that disappointment and heartbreak, they've also figured out how they'll be able to purchase those gifts once they have sufficient cash.

It's not quite the same as making a pilgrimage from Jericho to Jerusalem and tossing a few coins from one's largess Bartimaeus' way. But, what is being tossed the way of all those children and grandchildren is the lesson that Christmas is all about the material things of this world.

See how easy it is for parents and grandparents to defile themselves, falsely believing that they will make other people—like their children and grandchildren—truly happy by tossing a few coins in a retailer's direction? Then, their children and grandchildren will continue to believe that their true happiness is discovered in receiving material things. Sure, these parents and grandparents are focused upon giving rather than receiving, but are they giving their children and grandchildren what they *need* or what they *want*?

Bartimaeus stands in stark contrast to the young, rich man we heard about in the gospel two weeks ago. Jesus called this fellow to follow him, but the young man refused Jesus' invitation and "went away sad, for he had many possessions." How did he, as a "young man," acquire those many possessions? Could it be that his parents and grandparents lavished him with everything he could possibly want and to such an extent that, when his heart alighted from Jesus' call to a new way of life that would bring him true happiness, the young man couldn't bear the idea of parting with all of those things?

In today's gospel, however, Jesus calls Bartimaeus and he quite literally throws away everything he possesses and his only means of financial support, then runs to meet Jesus and commits himself to follow in Jesus' way. The story of his conversion from being a "Son of Defilement" to a "Son of Honor and Dignity" reminds us all of us who are baptized that we also need to leave everything behind if we are to experience the deepest desire of our souls being fulfilled.

How will that occur?

As we give each other what we truly need rather than continuing to defile ourselves by giving each other everything we want.

With 57 days left until Christmas, what are you anxiously anticipating this Christmas day? Receiving material gifts or to be Christ by giving those you love the gift they truly need?



Did today's homily raise any question(s) you would like me to respond to? Mail your question(s) by double clicking on the mailbox and I will respond to your question(s) at my first available opportunity.