

Yesterday was the commemoration of the great reformer Martin Luther, who died February 18, 1546. During his life, Luther wrote volumes and volumes, yet his last written work was a little scrap of paper that was found in his pocket after his death.

On this little paper was written the words, “This is true; we are all beggars.” As he was dying, Luther looked back and reflected that he and all Christians are truly beggars before our Lord Christ.

Though being a beggar might seem a bad thing, as we look at Christ’s interaction with the blind beggar in our Gospel text, we realize that Luther’s final writing is in fact a word of blessing and encouragement. It is a good thing to be a beggar before Christ.

So before we get to the text itself and see how we are blessed beggars before Christ, we need to first understand a cultural, historical reality that frames the events recorded in the Gospel. So back in Jesus’ time, when a great ruler such as the Emperor or a king would visit one of his cities, certain events would take place.

First, the ruler would be accompanied by a grand retinue, a crowd, as he processed into the city. As he would enter, the people would line the path and cry out to the ruler, often with the words “Lord, have mercy,” followed by various petitions. They might ask the emperor to fix their aqueduct or drive off the barbarians or whatever.

The emperor or king would then at certain points stop the procession and command that one of the crowd, often a poor beggar, be brought before him. He would ask what this beggar would have him do, and then in a display of magnimity, he would grant the beggar’s request, showing his great power and his love for his subjects, who would then sing his praises.

So with that all in mind, it becomes clear that what takes place outside Jericho is nothing less than a royal visit by the King of Kings, even as His true power and glory are still concealed.

Jesus approaches Jericho, accompanied by his disciples and many other people, a great crowd. The hubbub of this group is such that a local beggar hears and realizes something big is going on. This particular beggar, whom St. Mark tells us is named Bartimaeus, isn’t just a beggar – he’s also blind. He is completely reliant on the charity of others for his daily existence. He can do nothing for himself. He depends totally on mercy.

But though he’s blind, he’s not deaf, and he’s heard about someone who abounds in mercy: Jesus of Nazareth. What exactly he’s heard we aren’t told, but it’s enough that the blind beggar believes that Jesus, who has healed others, can and will heal him as well.

As soon as he’s told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he begins crying out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Here’s the beggar crying out to the passing King. He says that Jesus is the “Son of David,” not only a royal title but even moreso a title given to the Messiah. This beggar is confessing that Jesus is the promised one foretold in the Scriptures.

It's very much an irony intentionally recorded by the Holy Spirit that only the blind guy can see the truth of who Jesus is; even Jesus' twelve closest followers don't fully see this reality. And such is this beggar's belief in this that even when the crowd is trying to get him to be quiet, he shouts all the more: "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Through the faith the Holy Spirit has worked in his heart, the beggar knows that only Jesus can help him, and that Jesus, the Messiah, will have mercy on him.

In response to the repeated cries of this beggar, Jesus, the processing monarch, halts the procession and commands the beggar be brought before Him. When this lowly beggar is led to Jesus – remember, he's blind and couldn't approach himself – Jesus speaks as the great King and says, "What would you have me do for you?" He stands as the merciful Lord asking how He might help one of His beloved subjects.

Now, Jesus is both King and God, and so He already knows what the man desires, but He asks so that the man might be able to confess his faith in Christ, both to further grow his own faith and also as a witness to those watching this interaction.

And what a confession and witness it is! What does the beggar say? "Lord, let me recover my sight." This is no simple request. There's a lot tied up in it! Could this man have asked that of any earthly ruler? No! No earthly lord, not even Caesar himself, could have granted such a request! In fact, to ask such a thing probably would have been seen as mockery and resulted in stern punishment, if not immediate death. So this beggar is confessing that Jesus is a greater King than any earthly king.

He's also confessing that Jesus is no mere prophet or wonder worker. The prophets of God did all manner of miraculous signs, but none ever opened the eyes of the blind. That was something reserved for the Messiah alone. So, the beggar confesses that Jesus is greater than the prophets.

Note too, the beggar doesn't ask Jesus to intercede for him, to ask God on his behalf. That's what a priest does. But Jesus is no mere priest, He is both the Great High Priest and the God to whom the priests cry out. He doesn't need to ask another to restore this man's sight. As the beggar confesses, Jesus Himself may let the man see again, of His own divine authority.

And the beggar addresses Jesus as "Lord." Now, that can just mean "master" or something like it, but very often it's also what the Jews would say in place of the name of God. Lord, in the Hebrew "Adonai," said in place of the Divine Name "Yahweh." Here, in this seemingly simple request, Jesus is confessed to be the Supreme Prophet, Priest, and King, above all others who came before or might come after. No mere man can lay claim to such a position. Only the Lord, Yahweh, come to earth as the Messiah, the Christ, could do this. That is what this beggar by faith confesses.

And further, on what grounds does this beggar cry out to Jesus? Does he claim that he's kept the Law, like the rich ruler St. Luke records earlier in this chapter? Does he say that he's done a bunch of good stuff for others and so he deserves a good turn himself? Does he say that God hasn't been fair to him and now has a chance to fix His mistake? No, the beggar does none of that. And none of that would have been true or right.

God can never be approached on our terms, by our merits or worthiness. Man can only come to God when God graciously draws him in. This beggar knows that God is as He describes Himself all throughout the Old Testament, “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” He cries out “Have mercy on me,” and He knows by faith that Jesus is by His very nature as God merciful.

In response to this grand confession, Jesus speaks as the merciful Sovereign. “Recover your sight.” This is how a king works. Kings decree things, and through their authority, those things happen.

Now Jesus has healed blindness before, and in that case, He showed His character as the loving Creator, the One who first made man from mud putting mud on a blind man’s eyes and recreating those eyes.

But here, Jesus is showing His character as the King of Kings. He decrees, “Recover your sight,” and because His Divine royal authority extends throughout the whole universe and over reality itself, the sight is immediately recovered. This of course happened at creation as well, with the universe coming into existence through His decree. And so now, the Creator King who declared “Let there be light” now declares “Recover your sight” and it happens.

The Lord Jesus makes a further decree when He says of the beggar, “your faith has made you well,” or more literally, “your faith has saved you.” Jesus knows this man’s heart, knows that His Word has worked like the seed from last week’s parable, sprouting in good soil and bearing fruit of a wonderful confession. As the Scriptures say, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”

This faith then bears still more fruit, for we read that the beggar “immediately... recovered his sight and followed Him, glorifying God.” The man didn’t thank Jesus and go on his way, off to pursue the things of the world. This saving faith did not go dormant upon receiving the gift of God. No, he immediately follows Jesus.

Now, where is Jesus headed? As Jesus told the disciples before meeting the beggar, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem.” Jesus is headed to suffer and die for the sins of the world. The King and Lord of all is going toward humiliation and sadness and pain and death, His only crown to be one of thorns, the “recognition” of His kingship a mocking placard placed over His head upon the cross.

This is where the beggar is following Jesus, not on the path of glory, but the path of the cross. Yet though he and all the disciples will flee from Jesus at some point, nevertheless the King will not abandon His subjects whom He loves. He will appear to them, having risen on the third day and issuing another royal decree: “Peace be with you.”

The mercy He shows to the beggar He shows to His disciples and to all who will follow Him, in that age and in all the ages until His return in glory.

That mercy is shown to us still today. And in fact, we got to witness an example of it this morning, an example that shows forth much of the same mercy and divinity of our King and Lord. This example is Holy Baptism. Consider all the similarities.

First, we have someone utterly helpless, unable to save himself. In the Gospel, that's a blind beggar, someone who can only receive, who is totally dependent upon the mercy of others.

Today, it's a baby boy who can't do anything – anything – for himself and is totally dependent upon his parents. And even when older children and adults are baptized, they are still dead in their sins until the Word of God works faith in their heart and the Lord draws them to the font.

Second, we approach our Lord and King only through faith in His mercy. The beggar cried out “Have mercy on me,” and James' parents, Whittney and I, approach Jesus asking Him to have mercy on our son. The beggar cried out because he had faith in the promises of God, who Jesus was and what He as the Messiah would do.

Those who bring babies to the font do so because we have faith in the promises of God, that He who is merciful and gracious, that He who said “Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them” still desires the little children to be brought to Him.

We know that our King has the authority to do what we ask, because He has declared, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Now, where to approach this King? His authority extends over heaven and earth, and so any water and His Word may wield His power. But so that we might be able to give a wonderful confession to those who witness, like the confession of the blind beggar, the Church baptizes as a public act whenever and wherever possible. With every Baptism that happens here, the Lord speaks to you through His Word and reminds you of your own Baptism, which is just as valid and binding as it was on the day when you were at the font.

And speaking of the font, here the Lord is shown to be King as well. In Revelation, the last vision of the new heavens and earth is of “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”

Here is the throne. Here is the water of life, flowing with the living waters that wash away sin and grant entrance into the Kingdom. From this throne, the King declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” From this throne He speaks as to the leper Naaman and says, “Wash, and be clean.” From this throne, He joins us to Christ and makes us new creations.

This happens, as the restoration of the beggar's sight, immediately. No waiting. No further steps. No quid pro quo. Immediately, the Holy Spirit comes and makes this new child of God His temple. The King, purely out of mercy, grants saving faith, and then declares as He did to the beggar, “your faith has saved you.”

This faith then leads the baptized to follow Jesus, just like the beggar. As the beggar followed Christ to Jerusalem, to mocking and shame, those who are baptized today likewise follow Christ on the path of the cross.

Baptism is not just some nice cultural ceremony that we do to feel good. To be baptized is to have the devil and the sinful world become your greatest enemies. That's why Jesus commands that those who are baptized are also taught, so that they might be given the weapons of the Word, with which to fight against the powers of this present darkness.

However dark the road gets, though, we know where our Lord is leading. He would not stay in the tomb, but would rise on the third day, just as He promised. Holy Baptism joins us to Christ's death and His resurrection, and so we follow Him through death into life everlasting. Our path with Him is to Jerusalem – the New Jerusalem – where He will reign in peace and joy eternal.

Luther was right. We are all beggars. None of us have any worthiness before the Almighty King. And yet our King loves us, and mercifully grants us forgiveness, life, and salvation. He speaks and restores our spiritual sight, that we might see and understand the eternal blessings He gives us in our Baptisms. We follow Him, beggars in this life, but heirs of His Kingdom in the life to come.

In the name of Jesus, amen.