

Homily for December 10th.

Blind Bartimaeus II God is [STILL] with us!

This year, this season of the Nativity fast, we are focusing on the true meaning of Christmas – the real “Reason for the Season”. Instead of fretting about what is going on in the frenetic world around us, instead of trying to figure out how to “put Christ back into Christmas”, let’s focus on keeping our Christmas in Christ. Let us follow Him to that Holy Manger – celebrating the incarnation of the newborn Christ and worshipping Him from the inside rather than worrying about what’s going on outside. It’s cold out there, and He doesn’t need our help anyway!

During this season, we stand with the entire Church in affirming that “God is With Us” “Immanuel.” As we sang in our Kontakion of the Pre Feast this morning: “Rejoice, O earth at the message: with the angels and shepherds give glory to Him who shall appear by His own will as a young Child, He who was from eternity God.” Of course this is true all year long, but during this season it comes into clearer focus – almost like that long ago star which once appeared over Bethlehem.

Last week I mentioned that the title: “Son of David” is especially important to us at this season of the Nativity. This morning I want to examine that a little further with you. In order to

do that, we will need to go back to Blind Bartimaeus briefly – from last week’s reading. There is still more to discover!

When Bartimaeus, the blind man, heard the commotion that day as he sat beside the road leading to Jericho, he asked what was going on. The crowd answered, “Jesus of Nazareth” or “Jesus the Nazarene” is coming. That was not meant in any negative sense. It simply helped identify which “Jesus” they were talking about (they weren’t really up to speed on last names back then, so there needed to be some kind of generic means of identification. (Like saying “Paul the gardener” or “Mary, the hairdresser”.)

It is interesting that as Bartimaeus began calling out, he didn’t cry “**Jesus of Nazareth**, have mercy on me?” Based on what he had been told so far by the crowd, no one could fault him for that. Right? Instead, he cried out “Son of David have mercy on me. Son of David. What did he mean by that?

As a matter of fact, the phrase “Son of David” could signify one of several different things by the time of the New Testament. It could mean:

- * A literal, biological son of King David. Solomon was the biological son of David by Bathsheba, as was Absalom by Maacah (May’ah-keh). Here, there was a direct, physical, Father / Son link.

- * “Son” in the ancestry.com sense – i.e. someone who is in the ancestral lineage of King David. Joseph the Betrothed fell into

this category. When the Angel came to Joseph in a dream to announce the Virgin Birth, he said; “Joseph, **son of David**, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife,” Joseph lived some one thousand years after King David, so he obviously wasn’t David’s physical offspring. He was, however of the lineage of David, and considered in this sense a “son of David”.

There were probably other definitions floating around back in First Century Galilee. It’s a big world!

As important as these various designations may be, they are not what Bartimaeus was thinking when he cried out “Son of David, have mercy on me!” The most significant application of that title in the first century was its designation for the Messiah – Whose arrival many Jews were greatly anticipating. This “Son of David” was the Son prophesied in Isaiah and the prophets.

No wonder Bartimaeus was so excited?

Even though no one apparently offered him this information, Bartimaeus knew instantly that this Person walking by him was more than just a famous figure. He knew that – or at least by anticipation hoped - that this was the One he had heard about. The one Whose arrival so many people were anticipating. Could this be the long promised Messiah? No wonder he wouldn’t let anyone hush him up as he sought to find out!

We run across this phrase some 65 times in the New Testament. It was voiced by many, but seems to have been a favorite proclamation of the infirm (the blind), the downtrodden (The Canaanite Woman), the simple masses, (this is what they cried out to Him as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday), and, to the great agitation of the Pharisees, even the children in the Temple. Maybe it spoke to the poor and the downtrodden in a language they could understand and relate to. He was one of them! He was a man, a human no different than themselves. But he was a very special man from a royal lineage. They wanted to see Him, to be near Him. We see something similar whenever the British royal family goes out into public. Masses of people line the streets, hoping to get a glimpse.

And by that he meant . . .?

Here is an important question to ask. If the phrase “Son of Man” was a catch phrase for “Messiah” in the first century, did Blind Bartimaeus believe that Jesus was God – the “Son of God”?

The answer may surprise you. Probably not! He may have wondered – especially *after* his healing, but most likely he would have thought of this Messiah as a very holy man (which He was) who had been sent by God to redeem His people.

As I said a moment ago, there was great excitement amongst many (but not all) of the Jews of the first century in anticipation of

the coming Messiah. But what kind of Messiah were they expecting? We may think that every Jew living in the first century had exactly the same beliefs about everything. That is far from the truth. One author I read compared Jewish views in the first century to Christian views in the twenty first century. “The list of items ‘all Jews agree[d] on’ he observed, “is fairly short.” [P.J. Long “Reading Acts”] Kind of frightening, when you think about it!

There were different sects in Judaism, and each of them had their own views. Almost everyone believed that the Messiah would be a great military leader who would overthrow the hated Roman government. The Essenes near the Dead Sea, looked for both a crushing military leader and a reforming priestly Messiah who would clean things up in the religious world as well. The Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, were keenly interested in His coming, since His arrival would not only mark the end of the Roman government, but the inauguration of the new age and the eternal Kingdom. The Saducees, who denied the resurrection of the dead, had almost no interest in the subject at all. Maybe they thought: “Who cares? I won’t be here one way or the other.” They weren’t looking for Him.

In one sense, and definitely in terms of what we are looking at this morning, it doesn’t really matter what Bartimaeus understood concerning this hoped for Messiah who was walking

by him that day. Even the disciples did not truly begin to comprehend His divinity until much later - and they were in His presence for three and a half years. They heard Him teach. They witnessed His miracles first hand. Yet when He stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the best they could stammer out was, “What manner of man is this, even the wind and waves obey His voice?”

Actually, that was a pretty good question. For the next eight hundred years, the Church struggled to come to grips with the staggering implications of the incarnation. So I think poor Bartimaeus deserves a pass on this one. If he was perplexed, he was in good company!

“Came Down from Heaven”

Isaiah’s ancient prophecy was that a child would be born, a Son would be given; and that the government would rest upon His shoulder. (Isaiah 9:6). A Virgin would give birth to this child and His name would be ‘Immanuel’ God with us. (Isaiah 7:14)

Both halves of that word are of extreme importance. If we are to be saved, both must be true. This Child must be God “Very God of very God” as we recite every week in the Nicene Creed. But He must also be WITH US. “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man”. If He falls short on either of

those in any way, we have no hope of salvation. It is as simple as that.

I said last week that Orthodoxy makes sense to almost everyone during the Nativity Season. OK – Maybe that is a bit of hyperbole - stretching things just a bit in order to make a point. But there is a great deal of truth in that hyperbole. Immanuel – God With Us – that word is that the heart of everything Orthodox. Not just Orthodoxy here at Saint James on this Sunday of the Nativity fast, 2017, but for Orthodox Christianity as it has existed for the past 2,000 years. Really!

Consider icons for a moment. If we didn't believe that our Lord was truly Immanuel – God with us – than I'm positive the Church would have spoken loudly against them from the very beginning. But in light of that one word, we know that God is now “depictable”. Of course He is, if we think about it. How could He NOT be? He had a body. He spoke. He wept. He slept in a boat. He grew weary and thirsty beside a well. If someone had had a smart phone back then, they could have taken a “selfie” with Him, and both of them would have shown up in the photo! And all importantly, He had a body that, like every human body, was subject to death. In that body, He died a physical death on a cross! That is all important!

Does this sound like modern theology, something just drummed up by an Orthodox professor somewhere? It isn't! Listen to the words of the 8th / 9th. century saint, John of Damascus, as he discusses this exact subject. What makes his words even more amazing is that they represented not just his own thought – God forbid! Even though he wasn't there physically, he became the hero of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in Nicea. Why? Because his teachings were absolutely consistent with what the Scriptures teach, and what the church had been teaching through the centuries.

Here is what he tells us in his famous work *On the Divine Images*:

God says, "You shall not have any gods other than me. You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness. You shall not adore them or serve them, for I am the Lord thy God." [Deut. 5.7-9] You see that he forbids image—making to avoid idolatry, and because it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, invisible God. As St Paul said at the Areopagus, "As we are the offspring of God, we must not imagine God to be like gold, silver, stone, or anything created by humans." [Acts 17.29] . . . The Scripture says, "You have not seen his face." [Ex. 33.20] How wise the Law is! How could one depict the invisible? How picture the inconceivable? How could one express to the

limitless, the immeasurable, the invisible? How give infinity a shape? How paint immortality? How put mystery in one place?

But when you think of God, who is a pure spirit, becoming man for your sake, then you can clothe him in a human form. When the invisible becomes visible to the eye, you may then draw his form. When he who is a pure spirit, immeasurable in the boundlessness of his own nature, existing as God, takes on the form of a servant and a body of flesh, then you may draw his likeness, and show it to anyone who is willing to contemplate it. Depict his coming down, his virgin birth, his baptism in the Jordan, his transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, his all-powerful sufferings, his death and miracles, the proofs of his deity, the deeds he performed in the flesh through divine power, his saving Cross, his grave, his resurrection and his ascent into heaven. Give to it all the endurance of engraving and color. Have no fear or anxiety . . .” (Excerpted).

Seven centuries before St. John of Damascus lived, another Saint John - Saint John the Evangelist, the disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, spoke with equal conviction about the reality of Christ's coming in the flesh. In the prologue to Saint John's Gospel, he wrote: *“And the Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”* And in

his first epistle he writes: *“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”* No wonder he was so animated about this. His knowledge of this subject was firsthand!

As an aside – some of you may have heard about the “thrilling” discovery of an ancient 1600 years old manuscript last week that “Tells the Real Story of Jesus”. They make it sound like this manuscript has never been seen before (even though there have been copies readily available for any number of years), and that the Church “suppressed” these “hidden” teachings in order to cover up the truth about what Jesus really taught and said.

As a matter of fact, this bizarre manuscript represents a common and ancient heresy known as *Gnosticism*. Yes, the church DID reject this horrible teaching. Saint John sure did! Not because he wanted to hide the truth, but because Gnostic teachings were utterly heretical, and because they perverted the true message of the Gospel. They had absolutely nothing to do with the real Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Interestingly at the heart of Gnosticism is the belief that matter is evil, and that therefore, Christ could NOT have come in a

physical way, “in the flesh”, since, like Plato before them, they considered that to be beneath the dignity of the Divine Spirit. For this reason, the Gnostics invented any number of bizarre alternatives to escape the clear teaching of Scripture that Christ truly DID come in the flesh. Yes, their heresy was rejected by Christians from the very earliest times. Thank God!

How early? We just heard it. When Saint John wrote “*every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God*” he was responding to an early form of Gnosticism as it existed in the first century. He utterly rejected these teachings, since he, himself knew our Lord and was one of His disciples. He heard his voice. He felt His touch. He looked into His eyes. In short. He knew better! “This is the disciple who testifies of these things,” he concludes his Gospel, “and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”

Interesting, isn’t it, how the “drive by media” likes to sensationalize nonsense stories like this just before Christmas and just before Pascha. It certainly pulls in a lot of money for them – click by click! (So I say . . . don’t get sucked in!)

So what Difference Does it Make?

In his classic book “On the Incarnation”, the fourth century Saint Athanasius of Alexandria goes into this subject in depth. If you are not familiar with it, or if it is on your shelves collecting

dust, I strongly suggest that this would make excellent reading for the Advent season. Like the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament, it's not necessarily light reading. It was, after all, written over sixteen centuries ago! But these writings were pivotal at the First Ecumenical Council. St. Athanasius WAS at that council, and his wise teachings won the day – and helped provide us with the Nicene Creed which we recite every Sunday.

Let me read from you a lengthy excerpt from *On the Incarnation*.

Because death and corruption were gaining ever firmer hold on them, the human race was in process of destruction. Man, who was created in God's image and in his possession of reason reflected the very Word Himself, was disappearing, and the work of God was being undone. The law of death, which followed from the Transgression, prevailed upon us, and from it there was no escape. The thing that was happening was in truth both monstrous and unfitting. . . . It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits. As, then, the creatures whom He had created reasonable, like the Word, were in fact perishing, and such noble works were on the

road to ruin, what then was God, being Good, to do? Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning? Surely it would have been better never to have been created at all than, having been created, to be neglected and perish . . .

(8) For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God entered our world. In one sense, indeed, He was not far from it before, for no part of creation had ever been without Him Who, while ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now He entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level in His love and Self-revealing to us. He saw the reasonable race, the race of men that, like Himself, expressed the Father's Mind, wasting out of existence, and death reigning over all in corruption . . . He saw how unseemly it was that the very things of which He Himself was the Artificer should be disappearing. He saw how the surpassing wickedness of men was mounting up against them; He saw also their universal liability to death.

All this He saw and, pitying our race, moved with compassion for our limitation, unable to endure that death should have the mastery, rather than that His creatures should perish and the work of His Father for us men come to nought, He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own . . . [and] not only

so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father . . . He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt.

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

Conclusion

How much of this did Bartimaeus understand when he cried out “Son of David have mercy on me” that day outside Jericho. Almost none of it, I’m sure. But one thing he did understand. He was blind and desperate. He knew . . . he prayed that the Holy Man passing by him was someone Who could bring him out of his

world of darkness, poverty, and despair. And his hopes were not in vain. With only a word Christ said “receive your sight” “And he received his sight.” And from that moment on he followed him.

This morning, as we move rapidly through this Advent season, let’s be sure we know the real “reason for the season”. We are no different than Bartimaeus. We live in a world of shadows, and that world is growing darker by the day. Our Lord looks at our plight with compassion as He did on Bartimaeus. His entry into this world was a direct response to the “Divine Dilema”. He knew that we could not save ourselves, and so instead became one of us in every respect. He took on human nature, and carried it to the cross. In His death, we died. And in His resurrection, WE arose and do arise.

Bartimaeus followed our Lord on that day, and no doubt for the rest of his life. He glorified God and gave praise to Him.

At this Nativity season, it is our incredible privilege to join in that hymn of praise, echoing the angelic host as we sing: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace and goodwill to men!”

Amen!