

21 Pentecost: *Imagination and Faith*

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By Robert Bowler

“Imagine,” sang John Lennon. “Imagine all the people living life in peace.” “Imagine no ... need for greed or hunger / A brotherhood of man / Imagine all the people sharing all the world.” John Lennon has sparked the imaginations of millions if not billions of people to dream of a better world with his song, and because we can imagine it, it could be. After all, to imagine is the root of faith, the beginning of the way.

In the gospel for today, we heard about Bartimeaus, a blind beggar. He must have already heard all about Jesus. Despite Jesus’ best efforts to keep people quiet, word of what they had seen him do and heard him say had spread like wild fire. So when Jesus came to Jericho, even a blind beggar sitting by the side of the road knew all about the Messiah. And when Bartimeaus heard people whispering the name of Jesus and felt the crowd around him begin to pulse with expectation, he too became excited and began to shout, “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me.”

Of course, the people around him knew Bartimeaus as merely a blind beggar, one of the dregs of society, and tried to shut him up. Who was he to shout out? Who was he to be heard by the Messiah, the chosen of God?

If YOU walked by a beggar who was getting ornery, shouting and crying out, what would you do? Call the police? Raise your voice and order him to stop disturbing the peace? Yes, I probably would, too.

But Bartimeaus would not be cowed into silence. He raised his voice to be heard above the tumult of the crowd, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” I can imagine a group of men, disciples included, ready to lay hands on Bartimeaus and bodily move him around the corner out of the way, out of earshot. But Jesus stopped and said, “Call him here.”

Can you imagine what Bartimeaus felt like in that moment? Hope, expectation and excitement, all he had heard and imagined about Jesus and Jesus’ healing powers filling his heart to overflowing, and fear and trembling, too, overwhelming fear, in the face of God’s power incarnated. Bartimeaus, nevertheless, threw off his cloak, and sprang up. He may have been blind and broke, but he was definitely able-bodied and his resurrection was at hand. Then Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The answer came promptly, almost without any forethought, from the depths of an ocean of faith, “My teacher, let me see again.”

“My teacher,” said Bartimeaus, who had only heard about Jesus and presumably never met him before. But the words he had heard, spreading through the streets, had even reached his ears, and went deep into his mind and his heart. The picture of Jesus in his imagination became something alive within him. Jesus had already taken root in his heart as his rabbi, before the Godman himself physically walked into Jericho.

Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” And what did Bartimeaus do then? He followed Jesus in the way, his imagination, his faith, fulfilled.

We don’t often think about the role of imagination in faith, but Bartimeaus must have imagined Jesus for a long time to have such faith to cry out loudly despite the social pressures which kept him as a mere blind beggar, broke, on the side of the road. In fact, his imagination WAS his revelation, his intuition of the presence of God in Jesus, the

truth that set him free, the presence of the teacher himself in his heart, his very faith. He saw the light of truth, believed in it and therefore he could see again.

At an early age we are taught that imagination, daydreaming in school, is something tolerated but worrisome. We should just grow up and outgrow it. After all, as adults, we will have jobs to do, bills to pay, and our own very imaginative kids to raise into sensible grown-ups like us. So we echo our parent's voices when we say to our kids, "You're daydreaming again, junior, snap out of it and clean up your mess," or, "There you go again with your useless flights of fancy."

I remember as a kid in grade school, some of my teachers commented on my report card that I was a dreamer and needed to pay more attention in class. I am sure their classes were considerably less interesting than my daydreams! Teachers who tapped into my imagination gained my respect and kept me interested. My sixth grade teacher Mr. Reese, for example, read the Narnia tales by C.S. Lewis aloud every classroom day. And he wore the most godawful ties that never matched his jackets, purple with pink polka dots, for example. He said he was color blind and did not know what he was buying or wearing. But he taught fractions by cutting that god-awful tie in half. His imaginative teaching made me interested even in math.

Some religious leaders decry the Harry Potter books and movies as instruments of the devil. They have an irrational fear of imagination and thereby show a lack of real faith. In fact, the Harry Potter phenomenon has drawn countless teenagers and adults into reading and healthy imagination again.

In the Chapel Gallery we currently have a show of Icons in the tradition of the Byzantine era. Using gold leaf and egg tempura and a myriad of colors painted on wood boards, these icons bring vividly to life the sacred stories of the Bible. Christine Hales calls icon "writing", the tradition of depicting these stories in visual form in this manner, as bringing heaven to earth. And she is right. Only we can bring heaven to earth when we use our imaginations to picture a better world, the world the saints worked to bring to earth with their lives.

And when we read our psalm for today, I bet most of us had a hard time keeping our imaginations at bay:

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, **
then were we like those who dream.

*Then was our mouth filled with laughter, **
and our tongue with shouts of joy.

*Then they said among the nations, **
"The LORD has done great things for them."

*The LORD has done great things for us, **
and we are glad indeed.

*Restore our fortunes, O LORD, **
like the watercourses of the Negev.

*Those who sowed with tears **
will reap with songs of joy.

*Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, **
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

Yes, our tears water the seeds of our imaginations and faith grows in us, bursting our shells in joyous exuberance. When we look at an icon of St. Francis or St. Anthony, for

example, and we see in it some of the inspiration that motivated them to live their lives in the ways they did, we are seeing a refraction of the light of the incarnation itself.

Blind Bartimeaus felt hope, excitement, expectation, fear and trembling, boiling up all together, when he heard that Jesus was near, and he cried out, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Similarly, it is our imaginations, our faith in the life God is calling us to live, that heals our blindness and allows us to see. And if we had eyes to see, we would find reminders to turn to God all around us, reminders of what life could be if we followed the way which Christ calls us to live.

His power can work, his light can shine, through colorful icons, the Sunday lectionary, even sermons, and especially the Eucharist's bread and wine, if we use our imaginations in faith. We can hear his call in the love of friends and family, a song on the radio, or a simple greeting on the street, if we use our imaginations in faith. We can feel his compassion when we see the tears of a sick child or the hunger of people far away, if we use our imaginations in faith. Even seeing the last of the autumn leaves as we walk through the woods can call us to God's presence, if we use our imaginations in faith. If we lacked imagination, we would not have the faith to hear his voice, see his love, and follow his way, day by day.

So like Blind Bartimeaus, rise up at his call, throw off your cloak, burst your sheaves, and follow in the way, for your resurrection is at hand.

Amen.