

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Nov 16th 2015

The first reading from Maccabees provides a sadly familiar account of pressure to assimilate within an unwholesome culture. As a Star Trek fan, this reminds me of the Borg, who warned: “You will be assimilated; resistance is futile!” But resist we must.

As described in Maccabees, “men who were breakers of the law” started this process. One wonders how such people become leaders, and how they could become so effective at seduction. After establishing a beachhead, they adapted the gymnasium for their purposes, which caused the youth to regard their religious commitments as unwanted burdens. The process goes downhill from there, eventually leading to coercive and punitive laws against those refuse to go along with the crowd. Eventually the mere existence of religious precepts that challenged cultural practices triggered outrage and condemnation. This was not such a tolerant and diverse society after all!

Similar pressures toward assimilation seem operative today. What makes the road to perdition so seductive? Why do “breakers of the law” gain so much traction? Is something missing in the witness of the faithful? Human nature seems remarkably stable over time in its capacity to be called away from the path of truth. Swimming against the stream – or finding the way back – is often hard. We need help.

Today’s psalm is a prayer in the midst of cultural decay – the cry of one who embraces faithfulness in the midst of a corrupt culture. But it also raises important questions. How can we resist evil while still loving our enemies? How can we demonstrate a “way of living” that is more winsome, that empowers resistance and strength? We need the light of life to lead us.

The passage from Luke’s gospel resembles one from Mark that we read a few Sundays ago. Mark names the blind man as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus. (I always liked the fact that Mark humanizes this man -- he is someone’s son, after all.) In both accounts, Jesus asks him: “What do you want me to do for you?”

Blindness had caused him to be dismissed and marginalized by others. Jesus’ gift allowed him to join the others in the good of seeing. With this barrier removed, he returned to the culture that had excluded him. But isn’t it also remarkable that his example moved others to join him in giving praise to God? Perhaps that is also a miracle. With the Lord’s intervention, a redemptive form of assimilation was somehow able to occur. We can do with more of this, no?

We need to consider Jesus’ question: “What do you want me to do for you?” He does not stop asking this question just because he gets a request that is outlandish, odd, or foolish. He listens. Thankfully, he does not do everything we ask. Today, together, let us ask for help in living wisely and productively, growing in faith, hope, and charity despite our circumstances. Let us follow the light of life, seeking the kind of assimilation that Luke records, not the kind that we saw in Maccabees.

Thanks be to God