

For the last few years on Memorial Day I have joined a priest friend in visiting a cemetery where the graves of a mutual friend, and my priest friend’s parents are located. Before leaving the cemetery we also visit the graves of a couple of the priests buried there. At the grave of one of those priests there are always two men keeping vigil that day. These men, along with several others who take shifts at this annual vigil, are recovering alcoholics. This priest dedicated a major part of his ministry to alcoholics whose addiction had “blinded” them to so much in life. Through his compassion their sight had been restored in the manner of Jesus’ healing of the blind Bartimeaus.

In today’s second reading from the letter to the Hebrews the redemptive work of Jesus is presented through the metaphor of priesthood, the only place in the bible where Jesus is so described. Jesus, as we know, was not cultic temple priest. He was a layperson, a carpenter by trade who eventually became an itinerant preacher. Yet Hebrews presents Jesus as the fulfillment of what the Jewish temple priesthood could only point to. Jesus is priest because he is **both** the one who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of the people **and** at the same time is the victim offered. The central trait that marks the life of Jesus as priest is compassion. *Compassion* from the Latin “cum passio” is to “feel with.” More than pity, compassion is the conscious decision to enter into the life and sufferings of another. As priest Jesus “is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset with weakness” (Hb. 5:2). Though divine and sinless, Jesus united to himself our fallen human nature becoming subject to frailty, and death. Jesus’ healing of Bartimeaus reveals his divine compassion especially for people who find themselves sitting along the roadside of life—the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the hopeless if not blind physically, then rendered blind by people’s indifference. Bartimeaus’ plea: “I want to see” (Mk. 10:51) is not only a cry for physical sight, it is also a cry to be noticed, to be recognized, to be counted, to be valued, to be loved.

In baptism each of us was given Jesus' gift of sight; healed of the blindness of original sin. Healed and united to Christ, each of us shares in Jesus' own priesthood and mission in three distinct and interrelated ways: as priest (offering worship/prayer especially here in the liturgy), as prophet (living a life of witness to God in the world), and king (in the model of Jesus as a foot-washing servant). While the sacramental ministerial priesthood of Holy Orders differs from the common baptismal priesthood in that it is a particular call and designation of sharing in the leadership of Jesus' flock, the Church, which he exercises as head, yet it is related to the common priesthood of all the baptized since it arises from it. Today's liturgy calls each of us to exercise our dignity as a priestly people by paying attention to those we "see" along our life's journey. This call was brought home to me by an experience I had this past Monday.

As I entered the local Target store, sitting by the doorway was a mentally challenged special needs person, someone who likely works at an entry level task in the store and was waiting for someone to come and take him back home. I passed him by as I entered just like everybody else I observed, having been conditioned by our culture not to stare or engage with those who have some disability, by our reckoning. As I passed into the store I was struck with the thought, "Who's to say that you just passed Bartimeaus, even more Jesus himself, in the guise of your fellow human brother sitting by the door, longing to be noticed, to be recognized for who he is, like you, a child of God? Who is really "blind" here? As I left the store shortly afterward this man was still sitting by the door, still being passed by. I made it a point to stop, offer a smile and a greeting. He looked up at me, said nothing, and smiled as I continued on my way.

Who is or where is Bartimeaus today—at home, at school, at work, here in the parish, in our community, the wider world? Who is calling out to us—"I want to see?"—I want to be noticed, accepted, counted, loved? Today, Jesus invites us to be priests of compassion saying to the Bartimeaus we meet, "I see you. Receive your sight. I am here beside you."