

## Seeing the Details

By Michael Pakaluk, Ph.D.

October 24, 2021—Thirtieth Sunday Ordinary Time

Readings: Jeremiah 31.7-9; Ps. 126; Hebrews 5.1-6; Mark 10.46-52.

---

In these notes, I want to assist your prayer over the Scripture by calling attention to certain details in the gospel reading.

The reason for this attention to detail is that, in Scripture, God teaches as much by what happens, as by what is said. He is the Lord of providence and of history, and it is by His design that these things happened as they did. The gospel writers saw that God works in this way, which is why they took care to record certain details. Their own writing has a similar character: they often teach through what can appear to be very small details.

Here is an example of what I mean in the account of blind Bartimaeus. Mark tells that after they called him, “He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus.” That is an interesting detail: he threw aside his cloak. We can say that, from all eternity, God planned that he should throw aside his cloak. And Bartimaeus did throw aside his cloak. And Mark takes care to preserve this detail for us. Furthermore, if Mark was a scribe for St. Peter, and Mark’s gospel captures the preaching of Peter, as the early Church thought, then this detail was also something that St. Peter thought noteworthy and would add when he told the story—a story which he witnessed.

Notice that by dwelling on this detail in this way we start taking seriously *what happened*. We can thereby start overcoming some of the distance from the gospel that, perhaps, was introduced by an encounter with the “historical-critical method”—with all its strengths, and weaknesses. We are not so much tempted to look at the gospel as a collection of pious stories or elaborations. We will not say that Scripture teaches us something just as much if it is false. We may indeed go on to draw ethical, psychological, and personal lessons from it, but, first of all, we are attentive to the concrete details of *what someone actually did and said*.

What happened is primary; meanings and lessons are secondary, at least for the purposes of learning and, more importantly, for the purposes of Christian life. Isn’t it the case that the life of discipleship is not a matter of pleasant feelings or mere words, but of acting concretely, in the way that the praiseworthy figures in the gospel did?

## Throwing Aside the Cloak

So Bartimaeus throws aside his cloak . . . Now, when you think about a detail in the gospel, think about what is said, to be sure, but also take care to consider what *could have been said*, or *might have been said*, but was not. In this story, for instance, we might have been told that he simply left his cloak behind. Indeed, he did leave it behind. It would have been truthful to say that he left it behind. In fact, it would have been truthful to tell the story without mentioning anything about the cloak. Bartimaeus might even have taken his cloak with him. But he didn’t, and he even threw the cloak aside, and Mark takes care to preserve this detail for us. So, let us pay attention to it.

A couple of things: that cloak may have been Bartimaeus’s only possession. Thus, to throw it aside was, for him, a renunciation of his possessions. He wasn’t “attached” to that cloak.

Also, it was essential for his daily work of begging since it cushioned him from the ground and gave him some protection against the elements. Thus, for him to throw it aside was already an act of faith—he clearly was not planning to come back, take up his cloak again, and return to begging! So, this is truly remarkable.

The detail also shows his eagerness. He is intent on going to the Master while he has the chance. He will not miss this opportunity. The cloak is “in his way;” it is an encumbrance; it might slow him down.

Note that we do not need to be scholars of ancient languages and civilizations, we do not need to know any journal articles of Biblical scholarship, to see these three important things about that detail: renunciation of possessions; act of faith; intentness to meet the Lord. The detail that “he threw aside his cloak” has the meaning which it does to anyone with an ordinary familiarity with human life. Again, this is by design.

Maybe you can see even other meanings in this detail?

## Being an Eyewitness

After he threw away his cloak, he “sprang up.” The Greek verb means, literally, got back up on his feet. Obviously, every time someone is sitting down, in order to move from his spot of his own accord, he needs to get up on his feet. But Greek speakers would usually just take for granted that someone got up. They would use this language of “got back on his feet” only when they wanted to draw attention to how quickly and enthusiastically someone got up. (In English, our idiom of “he stepped forward” is like that. Obviously, anytime anyone takes a walk he takes steps forward. But we say “he stepped forward” only when someone does so to volunteer or take an initiative.)

Consider, then, Bartimaeus: Mark could have written that he went over to see Jesus, just like that. But Mark, like other Greeks, in adding this detail, was drawing attention to how quick it was. That is why the translators have it that he “sprang up.”

There are details in the gospel of Mark that are added precisely to appeal to our imagination. They are intended to invite us to imagine what it was like to be there and see it for oneself, as if we were eyewitnesses. (This is another reason why scholars have thought that Mark’s gospel comes from Peter: Mark did not witness these scenes, but Peter did.) For example, at the feeding of the five thousand, Mark says that Jesus asked the crowd to sit down on the “green” grass (Mark 6.39). Why add the color? Clearly, to invite us to picture what it was like to be there and see it. Same here: the blind man sprang to his feet. He didn’t simply get up. He didn’t simply go over to Jesus. He threw aside his cloak and sprang up.

What other details in the passage invite a similar attention? We cannot review all of them in depth, since that would take dozens of pages. But consider the following details. Some of them you cannot see in translation, only in the Greek. For example, when Mark first refers to the blind man, this is the order of words in the Greek: “the son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus, a blind man, a beggar.” In Greek, what comes earlier in the sentence usually has the greatest emphasis and is regarded as most important. Consider the order of the words, then, used to refer to the man. First, he is identified in relation to his father. This personalizes him. He is not just a blind man in the crowd; he is someone’s son. Perhaps “Bartimaeus the son of Timaeus” was a convert and known to the early Christians who read this gospel. In referring to him in that way, Mark would be picking him out and making it clear that he is giving the story of how this man originally became a follower of the Lord. That this man was a beggar is given last. It is the least important thing; indeed, by the end of the story, he won’t need to beg any more, because he has regained his sight.

Another such detail is what he says to Jesus. Jesus initiates the exchange by asking, “What do you want me to do for you?” Of course, Jesus knows. But, as the Fathers point out, Jesus often asks supplicants what they want, for several reasons: first, so that it’s clear to everyone that the petitioner would actually welcome a cure (someone who made a living by begging for many years might not necessarily welcome the task of finding work and abandoning familiar ways); second, to teach that often we receive only if we ask; and third, to teach that often we need to make ourselves subjectively worthy of receiving a gift by asking for it.

What the man says in reply is not easy to capture in translation. The Latin of the Vulgate is accurate and literal, “Ut videam,” *that I might see*. This is exactly what the Greek says, or even, “. . . in order that I might see” or “so that I might see.”

Think about this language. This is a detail which Mark (and Peter) preserved because we are instructed by the concrete reality of what happened. Again, consider what the man might have said but did not. He did not say, “Please give me my sight” or “I want you to cure me of my blindness.” (The second would have corresponded better to Jesus’s

question, “What do you want me to do for you?”) Doesn’t the man, in a sense, take a risk by not “answering straight,” by saying this very strange thing, “so that I might see”?

I will make one other fine grammatical point: the phrase “in order that I might see” carries with it a place holder. If I were to write it out in a diagram, I’d write something like this:

What I want is: { \_\_\_\_\_ in order that I might see. }

Thus, it is not an expression that focuses solely on the result, like, “what I wish is that I can start to see like everyone else.” It is an expression that leaves space for someone else to act, and for that other person to will to act, to do something, with the result that I would regain my sight. Also, it leaves it all open. The blind man leaves it entirely up to Jesus how this is to happen. This point is important, because in leaving it open, he makes an act of faith, implicitly, that Jesus can do all things. He is implicitly believing that Jesus is God because only God is such as to be able to do all things.

We have an expression in English, “Please.” This word is an abbreviation for “If you please.” (French, *s’il vous plaît*.) We say the word so many times in a perfunctory way that we have forgotten that we use this word to make a request by leaving the matter entirely up to the other person. “Please pass the salt” means “If you please (not if I please), pass the salt—I leave it up to you.” Thus, we can understand *ut videam*, “in order that I might see,” as an even more highly refined way of not in any way seeming to command or make a demand on the Lord.

Now, this refinement, when he is actually in the presence of the Lord, is all the more remarkable when we consider how Bartimaeus was just a few moments earlier crying out vociferously, after which he threw away his cloak and sprang to his feet. Bartimaeus is an image of single-mindedness combined with faith, tremendous affection, and refinement.

Another detail, which the Fathers draw attention to, is that Bartimaeus changes in how he addresses Jesus. He begins by calling him “Son of David,” but then, in his presence, he addresses him as “Rabboni.” What is the reason for this? St. Jerome says that “Rabboni” or “Rabbi” is an even higher title. Perhaps in saying this Jerome was thinking about how rabbis prefigured our priests. Remember the saint who said that sometimes he could see his guardian angel, and that, before he was ordained a priest, his angel always walked before him, but that, after his ordination, the angel walked behind him?

But what I tend to think, instead, is that he heard how those around Jesus addressed him, so he adopted it for himself. We know that Mary Magdalene affectionally called Jesus “Rabboni”—see their exchange in the garden after the resurrection (John 20.16). The blind man, not knowing how to address Him, got close, heard those around Jesus calling him “Rabbi” (“Master”)—“Rabbi, here is the man,” “Rabbi, this is the one who was crying out”—and took this term of address for himself. In that respect, it is just like when we say “Our Father,” since we are taking upon ourselves an intimate term of address that Our Lord and his friends use.

There are other details in this passage and the other texts worthy of careful attention, but I’ll leave those for you to find and think about, in conversation with the Lord.

*Michael Pakaluk holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University, and he is a professor at the Busch School of Business of the Catholic University of America. His primary area of research is ancient philosophy. He is the author, most recently, of Mary’s Voice in the Gospel of John: [A New Translation and Commentary](#).*

### ***For Further Reading***

- ***[Mark: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture](#)***
- ***M. Pakaluk, [The Memoirs of St. Peter: A Translation of the Gospel According to Mark](#)***

### ***In Short . . .***

- ***The details of the Scriptures are always significant: God teaches us by what happens, and what is said.***
- ***In discarding his cloak and springing up, Bartimaeus shows his eagerness to abandon all and follow Christ.***
- ***When Bartimaeus states, “that I might see,” he entrusts himself entirely to Jesus. He makes an act of faith that Jesus can do all things.***
- ***Bartimaeus assumes the intimate address “Rabboni” for Jesus, a sign of his friendship with the Lord.***
- ***We are invited to become “eyewitnesses” in our contemplation of the Scriptures, entrusting ourselves to Jesus and seeing Jesus as did Bartimaeus.***