

Articles**Take Heart, Rise, He is calling you: Celebrating our Faith in Contemporary Africa***Alfred Zembe***Introduction**

One of the most difficult things today is to celebrate faith, especially in Africa where the message of Christ has been twisted and diluted such that if Christ was to return today, He might fail to recognize himself in the sermons and teachings attributed to him in Africa. In the midst of all this, the Church in Africa is told ‘Take heart, rise. He is calling you’; the final chapter of the document ‘Africae Munus’ by Pope Benedict. Biblical scholars have spent vast amounts of time on this passage trying to figure out the proper meaning of this call. Whether or not this call - φωνεῖ σε *phonei se* - is identical to that of the disciples - προσκαλέσατε *proskalesate* or καλέσατε *kalesate* remains open to interpretation and argumentation. However, considering the Markan cruciform discipleship one is inclined to explore the meaning of this passage, bearing in mind that in this instance Jesus tells those around him to call the blind Bartimaeus. What is certain is the fact that this call is not lesser than that of the disciples. We are also told that, upon his healing, Bartimaeus ‘follows Jesus along the way’; the first time such an event takes place in Mark, conveniently at the Gospel’s final miracle. In this paper, I am going to explore the meaning of this pericope, especially the words ‘Take heart, arise, he is calling you’ ‘Θάρσει, ἔγειρε, φωνεῖ σε’ and what they could mean for the Church in Africa *vis a vis* the prevalent circumstances.

An exegesis of *Tharsei, Egeire, Phonei se*

Firstly, I would like to look at the word ‘Θάρσει’ *tharsei*. The two most dominant translations to this word are ‘Take heart’ and ‘Be of good cheer’. The word presuppose three things, firstly knowledge, secondly trust and lastly past experience that affirms faith. In the word, there is no invitation to faith that doesn’t rely on previous experience.

It is not a word that asks one to have a leap of faith but rather, it calls on the hearer to ‘remember the deeds of the Lord’ Psalm 77. Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui in his article ‘TRUST THE GOD: *Tharsein* in Ancient Greek Religion’ notes that ‘Every few years new ancient religious texts come to light which contain forms of the Greek verb *tharreïn/tharseïn*, a term generally agreed to be loaded with religious significance’ however, ‘there has been little research on what kind of religious experience is implied by *tharseïn*’ since ‘the usual translations [...] do not convey the full semantic range of the verb, which, when used in religious (not only ritual) situations, implies, above all, being confident that a god will help’ (de Jáuregui 2005). de Jáuregui agrees with the bulk of commentators on the meaning of the term *tharseïn* but he adds the aspect of deeds already experienced which would compel one to ‘take heart’ (2005).

In addition, there is a way in which *tharsei* appeals to personal experience. It is an invocation which, even if it comes when one is amongst a community, is always personal and appeals to each individual. Herrero argues that in all religious circumstances and societies the term usually comes when there is risk and danger but ‘... even when a whole community is affected by danger and in need of divine help, the epiphanic experience implied by the imperative *tharsei* is almost always personal’. He adds that, ‘The reason for *tharsos* is the consciousness [that], even at a very intuitive level ...one’s resources are enough to confront the imminent danger with hope of salvation’. This is apparent in almost all the places in the New Testament where the verb is used. It might also be important in understanding Jesus’ frustrations at his disciples’ lack of belief in the instances where he utters these words.

Cranfield in his commentary *The Gospel According to St Mark* notes that, ‘The command Θάρσει (or Θάρσειτε) occurs seven times in the N.T.—always on the lips of Jesus [...] except for Mk x. 49, where it is spoken by those who tell the blind man that Jesus is calling him (227). An interesting point to note that builds from the above argument

is why Jesus would invite the disciples to call the man in this occasion. A logical possibility would be that this man had not experienced Jesus' works before and the call *tharsei* would not be relevant coming from Jesus directly to the blind man but from his disciples who had seen and experienced them. There is a possibility that Mark uses the person of Jesus to convey the type of call he wants for Bartimaeus who in this sense is representing his listeners.

As a result, *tharsei* is not simply a word that strengthens the blind Bartimaeus, rather, it is calling on him to recall what he had heard of Jesus. Looking at the narrative, one cannot help but agree that Bartimaeus had some knowledge of Jesus. Although it could have been limited, no doubt it was enough to spur him to cry out 'Son of David, have mercy on me!' The followers of Jesus' invocation '*tharsei*' can be understood as telling the blind man to remember what he has heard about Jesus on one hand, and on the other, telling him that Jesus can save you; we have seen it happen and we know it is possible. Above all, the disciples call and encouragement of Bartimaeus could also be a self-awakening for they also needed to 'take heart' and rise to the imminent occasion.

The second word to be looked at is ἔγειρε *egeire*. The most common translation of this word is 'rise'. Scholars harbor different opinions as to whether this word had any symbolic meaning or it was just a necessary thing for the man to be healed by Jesus. Maarten JJ. Menken, in his article, 'The call of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10: 46-52)' is of the view that the whole narrative of the healing of Bartimaeus has to be understood not independent of the section it falls under; 8:27-10:52 which contains three passion predictions and the disciples' continual misunderstanding of who Jesus is. Understood in this light, rise therefore could mean more than just standing up to receive the miracle. Culpepper in the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Mark* ponders the significance of raising people in Mark and asserts that, 'In Mark, Jesus is continually raising people: he lifts up Peter's mother-in-law (1:31), the paralytic (2:9, 11, 12), the man

with the withered hand (3:3), Jairus's daughter (5:41), the epileptic boy (9:27), and now Bartimaeus' (354). Such an observation has led many people to seek a deeper meaning of the word 'rise' or 'arise' considering the disciples' constant fall in misunderstanding Jesus' identity and call. Mark could be telling his community to rise to the occasion of the suffering and crucifixion of Christ.

Prior to this passage, the disciples were lagging behind and failing to get Jesus' point. Menken adds that, 'All three predictions are followed by a series of sayings of Jesus or a dialogue with Jesus in which he makes clear that the fate of his disciples will not be different from his own fate; his utterances to this effect are always provoked by a misunderstanding on the part of the disciples' (Menken 2005). This is evident when 'After the first passion prediction, Peter begins to rebuke Jesus (8:32)... To the second passion prediction, the disciples react with incomprehension (9:32)... after the third passion prediction, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, demonstrate their incomprehension by requesting a position of power in Jesus' glory (10:35-37)' (Menken 2005). The constant failure of the disciples in Mark can be understood as an invitation to the Markan community to do better. As a result, one would be doing injustice to the topic in question if *egeire* is not understood as an invitation to the disciples to rise to the occasion of Christ's suffering and 'follow him along the way'.

The word ἔγειρε *'egeire'* is closely connected with φωνεῖ σε *'phonei se'* in its theological interpretation. This is because Bartimaeus is told to rise as the first step of heeding Jesus' call. Menken is of the idea that the use of the word φωνεῖ over προσκαλέσατε or καλέσατε in this passage does not carry any theological significance since it has been used elsewhere. Culpepper and Stein agree that the use of the verb 'φωνεῖ' is unusual. However, Culpepper maintains that its use does not make it less of a call but, 'The repetition of the verb "to call" three times in v. 49 suggests that like the calling of the first disciples (1:16-20; 2:14), this healing miracle serves also as a call story, even though

the verb to call (*phonein*) does not appear in the earlier stories' (354). My focus here is to develop this idea of the narrative as more of a calling than a miracle and argue that this call was different from *προσκαλέσατε* or *καλέσατε* found in other passages.

As argued earlier, the blind Bartimaeus can be said to have had prior knowledge of Jesus due to the Christological implications of his first cry to Jesus 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me'. Although the scripture passage mentions that Bartimaeus was told that Jesus was coming, calling Jesus 'Son of David' twice means he had prior knowledge of Jesus. As a result, the call of Bartimaeus comes after his cry for mercy. Many scholars are of the view that the impartial blindness of Bartimaeus is not limited to Bartimaeus only but 'but also as [a metaphor] for the disciples, whose spiritual blindness still awaits a cure. In their case, they will need a second touch, as it were, for Jesus to open their eyes fully to his identity and mission' (Green, Brown and Perrin 90).

In addition, Stein argues that, 'The lack of any mention of assistance in the blind man's coming to Jesus has led some to suggest that he was not totally blind' (496). Walter Wessel in his chapter 'Mark' in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* agrees with this suggestion (722). Metaphorically, this was also the state of Jesus' disciples. They had an idea of who Jesus is but they lacked its full comprehension. Hence, the need for another miracle. The threefold repetition of the verb *φωνήσατε* '*phōnēsate*' – a verb not used in the call of any of Jesus' disciples prior to this point – could signal a different and more urgent call of Jesus. This is seen in the way Bartimaeus responds to Jesus' call; he responds immediately, 'throwing away his cloak and walking towards Jesus'.

There is also a connection between the healing of the blind Bartimaeus and 'the way'. The three passion predictions all happen on 'the way' to Jerusalem where Jesus will be exalted but above all, the place of his suffering, crucifixion and death. Menken asserts that, 'The "way" that

determines the entire section Mark 8:27-10:52, is the way to Jerusalem, and this is the way to Jesus' passion and death, as 10:32-34 in particular shows. Bartimaeus is called by Jesus to follow him on this way' (Menken 2005). Green, Brown and Perrin are of the view that this healing was representative rather than personal. They assert that, '...the healing of blind Bartimaeus and his following Jesus on the way into Jerusalem (Mk 10:46-52) echoes Isaiah 35:5-10's picture of the healed and ransomed exiles returning to Zion' (983). As a result, the verb φωνήσατε '*phōnēsate*' as used in this chapter represents a call to healing, faithfulness and supplication; different from that of the first disciples who were simply called to change their trade into students of Jesus.

Mark's exposition is far from coincidental. His choice of words and setting is always deliberate. He would like to make his point about the type of Messiah Jesus was and what is expected of his disciples. Green, Brown and Perrin observe that, 'Only after Jesus' cruciform call has been thoroughly established in his and his "blind" disciples' journey along the "way" to Jerusalem (Mk 8:31-38; 9:30-32; 10:32-45) is the first public affirmation of Jesus' messiahship recorded, and that by a blind man requesting mercy (Mk 10:46-52)' (983). For Menken, the placing of the Bartimaeus pericope is deliberate and calculated. This is because '... it offered Mark an opportunity to include an example of following Jesus on his way of suffering and death. In the present context, the final clause of the pericope is crucial: "and he followed him on the way"' (Menken 2005). He adds that, 'Bartimaeus is presented as an example to Mark's community: they are also called to go the way of service and, if necessary, of martyrdom, following in the footsteps of the Son of Man (cf 10:45) (2005).

What could this mean for the Church in Africa?

Firstly, Mark's narrative can help Africans have a better perspective of who Jesus is and how he works in their lives. There is a need for a proper Christology based on the scriptures rather than one based on

wishful thinking and fantasy. Ronald Rolheiser in his book *The Passion and the Cross* uses the story of Lazarus and Jesus on the cross to argue for an identity of Jesus that is very Markan. He makes the distinction between a savior and a redeemer in explaining the place of Jesus especially in a suffering world. He is of the view that, the fact that Jesus let Lazarus die only to rescue him later and God allowed Jesus to die only to raise him up on the third day is evidence that Jesus is a redeemer not a rescuer. His silence in times of our suffering does not mean we lack faith or do not pray enough – as most Pentecostals and ‘prophets’ say today – because ‘...Jesus never promised us rescue, exemptions, immunity from cancer or escape from death. Rather, he promised that, in the end, there will be redemption, vindication, immunity from suffering, and eternal life’ (Rolheiser 51). Such a theology is not welcome in most circles and even some Catholic priests have fallen prey to it; forgetting the words of Jesus Christ ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ Mark 8:34.

Furthermore, understanding the above will help African Christians to know that no amount of suffering should stop them from celebrating their faith. Suffering is part of our earthly pilgrimage and it is in that suffering where, at times, we encounter the Lord. Africa has had good examples of disciples who celebrated their faith even in difficult circumstances; the Ugandan Martyrs, Blessed Peter To Rot, The Tibhirine Monks among other faithful disciples of Christ who carried their cross even unto death. Even at their point of death, they never stopped praising God for such a gift.

Conclusion

African Christians today are facing many challenges and these are affecting their faith. The human being’s need to be relieved from pain has made Africans vulnerable to con pastors who promise them a Jesus who will remove all their pain and suffering. Many people are suffering due to bad governance, injustice, corruption and war. To

stand up and speak out against such evils has become more and more difficult for the truth is not always accepted for what it is. Those with power have created their own truths which other Africans ought to accept or face the consequences. The meaning of discipleship can be easily forgotten in such circumstances and the Gospel can be reduced to one among many 'truths'. Both the political and religious situation has encouraged the spread of pseudo gospels of Jesus Christ. As such, cruciform discipleship and 'the way' of Jesus Christ have lost their meaning in the lives of African Christians. It is in this situation that Mark tells African Christians 'Take heart, rise. He is calling you'.

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