

Jubelmässa
October 25, 2009, The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Gloria Dei Church, Philadelphia, PA
Mark 10: 46-52

I Guds Faderns, Sonens, och den helige Andes Namn. Amen.

Things are never what they seem to be. Although the Swedish High Mass has been celebrated in this place continuously since 1677 and in this building since 1700, the church building as we see it is from 1846. Gone is the pulpit with the high sounding board, the seven foot brick altar, and the altar painting by Gustavus Heselius, that, if it had survived the American Revolution, would be the oldest public art in the original colonies. Even in the center aisle, the tomb stones of three of the most distinguished pastors, who all died in office, Anders Rudman, Johannes Dylander and Olof Parlin are only the markers. The bodies are not underneath. Something that I just found out a few years ago when I got in the cellar and found that the bodies are really up here under the old altar. Indeed things are not what they seem.

One hundred years ago, twenty-four academic historians gathered to form the Swedish Colonial Society to try to help us see history as it really was, in a scientific way, not in a romanticized version. We can say that after all this time they have found many of the families, more than five hundred have been identified and characters like Governor Johan Printz, Pastor Erik Björk, and Christina Stalkop have come to life. We have been able to read the original church records with all of their genealogical secrets, and we have found the only good relationship with the Lenape people of any of the groups on the East Coast. The horrendous relationship of the English and the Dutch with the Indians contrasts mightily with the cooperative attitude between the Swedes, the Finns and the Lenape. I do not think it is going too far to say that the constant memorization of Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* left its mark on their behavior. For Luther rightly saw that the Ten Commandments are not just negative laws but imply positive actions. It is not enough to not kill but we are "to help our neighbor in all of life's needs" and not bear false witness but "come to the neighbors defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." Of course it would be expected that such a view would lead to a respect for the Lenape and a desire to share the Gospel with them as fellow humans. Even one hundred years after Campanius' Catechism the famous Linne had still not accepted the Indians as *homo sapiens* but he classified them with other "wild ones." But along the Delaware they were living as brothers and sisters, and without the foodstuffs provided by the Indians the Early Swedes would have perished.

To be able to see correctly is what I think today's Gospel story from Mark is saying to us. At first glance it seems like just another miracle story; another example of the interaction between faith and health. But in context it says much more. At this point in the gospel narrative Jesus is becoming increasingly isolated as he moves to his death in Jerusalem. He had warned the disciples three times about his coming death but they refused to accept it. Just before this story of the healing of Bartimaeus, James and John

have been arguing about who will get the places of honor in the Kingdom- who will sit on the right and the left, that is, who will have the most power after Jesus dies. They are chagrined to learn that Jesus says that the one who wants to be first shall be last and slave of all. That was not what they expected to hear. They wanted preference.

Bartimaeus may be blind but he is persistent and he is enthusiastic. He drops off his coat as he hurries up to Jesus. The crowd and the disciples try to shut him up, just as they had tried to prevent the children from being with him as his ministry began. As the story ends the blind man has come to faith, real sight and real insight and follows on the way. It is the disciples who are still blind. They walk along but they still do not see.

I do not think that there are many historical societies that have their legal address at a church, and begin their Council meetings with prayer. But the Swedish Colonial Society has had a long affiliation with Gloria Dei Church. And it has not seemed limiting. Indeed it has helped us go deeper into the human story of our ancestors.

Things are a lot different now than they were in the 1940's and I wonder if Pastor Joy would have enjoyed being here in those days. There was no Society Hill redevelopment, and no gentrified neighbors. There was no National Park protection with the seven acres now guarding this landmark. Around the church were broken down industries and poverty housing. Plans were made to place the Delaware Expressway at first, right in front of the church cutting off its view of the water. It took work and cooperation to get the Interstate moved back, the sexton's house restored, and the Roak House built. And now we are alert to the possibilities of moneyed interests who want casino gambling in this neighborhood.

Two of our thirty-one Governors have been clergy and two of the most important figures in our history have been strong Roman Catholic Christians. Gregory Keen graduated from an Episcopal Divinity School and was ordained a deacon before becoming a Catholic and Governor Melvin was also a Roman Catholic. Amandus Johnson himself was a Lay preacher in the Augustana Lutheran Church. There was a shortage of clergy in the Swedish Lutheran Church so that almost any male who could speak in public, and who went to one of the Lutheran Colleges was drafted to help out. Amandus preached many times at the local Gustavus Adolphus Church in South Philadelphia- a congregation that was not able to survive the Great Depression. None of this was seen as a conflict with their serious and scientific examination of the New Sweden story. They saw their faith as an asset.

Bartimaeus sees the truth and we seek to follow him in the way. For the Beatles reminded us "There is none so blind as those who will not see." Amen.

Kim-Eric Williams
Honorary Governor, Archivist