

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – October 24, 2021 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Sat. Vigil; 7:15 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

We celebrated the feast of Pope St. John Paul II on Friday, and as always, social media was flooded with memories of this saint who touched the lives of practically us all. And one of the things that people consistently note about meeting JP2 is the fact that they felt like, in spite of all that was happening around them – maybe they met him at a general audience with thousands of people in the crowd, maybe they met him in a more intimate setting –, yet in spite of that, they felt like he focused solely on them in that special moment. He looked into their eyes; there was a connection; he listened to them; he responded to them.

This same reality is present in today’s gospel. There is a great crowd following our Lord as always. Bartimaeus cries out to him – but how many others were calling out to him too? Some of the disciples even try to discourage him – “many rebuked him, telling him to be silent”, it said. But Jesus heard him and quickly corrected those who were trying to stifle him. So they changed their tune: “Take courage; get up, Jesus is calling you.” Bartimaeus had what we might now call a “JP2 moment” in that situation: there was so much calamity round about, but Christ noticed him and focused exclusively on him, regardless of all the others.

Many of us can relate to this on some level. For those who are married, perhaps there was that moment when you first met your spouse. Whatever was happening around you at that time has since faded into sepia tone, while the contact that you made remains in vivid technicolor. An authentic connection – when we both know and are known – is a powerful thing that stays with us. I know several who met people who are now saints – whether John Paul II, Mother Theresa, Josemaría Escrivá, or others; they often describe the same thing. If you will permit a very mundane example, it’s like having “airline status”. Suddenly, you are “somebody”.

Well, the reality is that this is always the way our Lord approaches each of us. We may well feel like part of the crowd calling out to him, but he always has time to hear us, to care, to connect, and to help. The second reading put it in terms of sympathy: he can deal patiently with us, for he became one of us and understands. He did not give in to weakness as we have; but having become man, he knows intimately of what we are made. He always knows where we are coming from, where we are headed, and why. Nothing about who we are or what we have done surprises him. It may be foreign to his experience, but not foreign to his humanity.

Sometimes, though, we may be tempted to over-compensate. Bartimaeus was extremely authentic: he did not pretend to be anyone other than who he was, begging God for mercy before everyone there present. We might want to dress the windows, though. And if we gave into that temptation, we should be inauthentic and thus preventing ourselves from an authentic connection with the Lord. He knows us through and through; nothing in us surprises him; he already died for it all. Why should we be anything or anyone than ourselves in his presence? Perhaps it’s because of the crowd – because of human respect, that we sometimes do so. But he never expects that.

No, he comes to save who we are now, not who we are with Instagram filters or who we could be in our imaginings. Nor does he come to save some past version of ourselves or our imagined future selves, either. Bartimaeus models authenticity and humility for us, and Christ’s response to him should encourage us to take the same approach. We must bring our authentic selves to Mass each Sunday and Holy Day and place those true selves on the altar – not some false version – , offering them to him, so that he may connect with us and save us too. Again, nothing about us surprises him – why should we hold back? But perhaps we sometimes do.