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Mark 10:46–52—Blind Bartimaeus (English Poetry)

Bartimaeus, the blind beggar healed by Jesus in Mark 10:46–52, has become an icon of English poetry. Notable poets like John Newton, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and George MacDonald have composed well-known verses in his honor.

John Newton (1725–1807) was an English captain of slave ships who, following a dramatic conversion to Christianity, became an ardent abolitionist. Newton is best remembered as the author of numerous hymns, including “Amazing Grace” and “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken.” Though not often sung, the following poem, “Mercy, O Thou Son of David,” is a hymn as well:

Mercy, O thou Son of David!
Thus blind Bartimaeus prayed;
Others by thy word are saved,
Now to me afford thine aid.

Many for his crying chide him,
But he called the louder still;
Till the gracious Saviour bid him
“Come, and ask me what you will.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82) was easily the most famous American poet of the nineteenth century, known for such

works as “Paul Revere’s Ride,” “The Song of Hiawatha,” and the epic *Evangeline*. His poem “Blind Bartimaeus” is especially interesting for two reasons: (1) in the original version, the material in italics below was printed in Greek, such that only those who read the New Testament in Greek would understand (Longfellow later repented of the idea and produced the more-famous English version of what had been called a “macaronic Greek/English poem”); and (2) Longfellow initially sent the poem to a friend (Samuel Ward) along with a letter, written the same day he had composed it and describing something of the process and inspiration (see below).

Blind Bartimaeus at the gates
Of Jericho in darkness waits;
He hears the crowd;—he hears a breath
Say, “It is Christ of Nazareth!”
And calls, in tones of agony,
“Jesus, have mercy now on me!”

The thronging multitudes increase;
Blind Bartimeus, hold thy peace!
But still, above the noisy crowd,
The beggar’s cry is shrill and loud;
Until they say, “He calleth thee!”
“Fear not! Arise! He calleth thee!”

And here is Longfellow’s comments on the poem, written to Samuel Ward in 1841:

I was reading this morning, just after breakfast, the tenth chapter of Mark, in Greek, the last seven verses of which contain the story of blind Bartimaeus, and always seemed to me remarkable for their beauty. At once, the whole scene presented itself to me in lively colors—the walls of Jericho, the cold wind through the gateway, the ragged, blind beggar, his shrill cry, the tumultuous crowd, the serene Christ, the miracle; and these things took the form I have given them above, where perforce, I have retained the striking Greek expressions of entreaty, comfort, and healing; though I am well aware that Greek was not spoken at Jericho. . . . I think I should add to the title, “supposed to be written by a monk of the Middle Ages,” as it is in that style.

George MacDonald (1824–1905) was a Scottish poet and novelist known for pioneering the genre of fantasy literature. He was a mentor of Lewis Carroll (author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*) and was a major influence on W. H. Auden, Madeleine L’Engle, and especially C. S. Lewis (who always referred to MacDonald as “the master”). Among his better-known poems is “Blind Bartimaeus, below, which seems to assume Bartimaeus has a partner (probably because Matt. 20:29–34 recounts the healing of two blind men and could report the same event as Mark 10:46–52):

As Jesus went into Jericho town,
Twas darkness all, from toe to crown,
 About blind Bartimeus.
He said, “My eyes are more than dim,
They are no use for seeing him:

No matter—he can see us!”

“Cry out, cry out, blind brother—cry;

Let not salvation dear go by.—

Have mercy, Son of David.”

Though they were blind, they both could hear—

They heard, and cried, and he drew near;

And so the blind were saved.