“They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem; Jesus was walking on ahead of them; they were in a daze and those who followed were apprehensive. One more taking the Twelve aside he began to tell them what was going to happen to him . . .” (Mk 10.32). This verse from Mark 10 begins to set the stage for the story we just heard. Jesus and his disciples were “going up to Jerusalem” where Jesus suspected that his life would come to an end . . . . It is on this final journey that the events from last week’s Gospel reading took place — the question from James and John about “greatness” and Jesus’ teaching that true leadership, true greatness, is rooted in servanthood.

The town of Jericho lay on the route Jesus was taking. It may have been a stop along the way, a night’s stay, or at least a place to get some food. But Mark tells us that, as they were leaving town, they encountered a blind beggar, someone known simply in Mark’s Gospel as Bartimaeus. All we really know about him is that, for some reason, at some point in his life, he had lost his sight. And because of that, he was reduced to the status of beggar, a nobody, dependent on the charity of others. Learning, somehow, that Jesus was passing by, he cries out in his need, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” Those around this poor man try to marginalize him even further, telling him, “Shut up!”. His desire for mercy — the restoration of sight — however, impelled him to ignore the nay-sayers, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And, hearing him, Jesus summoned him, affirmed his faith, and restored his sight. A chance encounter of mercy with Jesus, on Jesus’ way to Jerusalem, led to the son of Timaeus being able to see again.

Jesus has been walking by the diocese of Colorado these last few months in our search for new vision. And yesterday, at St. John’s Cathedral, several hundred of us gathered to bid God’s mercy as we chose a successor to Bishop O’Neill. Having been a part of several episcopal elections during my priesthood, I have been struck by the prayerful nature of this selection process. Unlike in some elections, there hasn’t been the kind of overt politicking that I’ve seen elsewhere. There wasn’t, in the imagery of today’s Gospel, a group of hard-hearted folks “shouting down” another, more marginalized group. On the contrary, from the silences between ballots to the hymns to the humor, there was a deep sense that the many divisions of our diocese — urban/rural; Front Range/Western Slope; resort/rancher; theological and political disagreements — these divisions could be laid at the foot of the Cross. And, with the selection of the Reverend Kym Lucas, we trust that our sight has returned, and that we can follow Jesus along the road.

At the same time we were bidding the Spirit’s presence in our election, however, we were made aware, yet again, of the hard-heartedness of many in our society as the news came in of the shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. Yet again, we saw the dark powers of this world on display, a resort to violence to horrific effects. As the Episcopal bishop of Pittsburgh said in a statement to his diocese yesterday: “The newscasts, sickeningly, are
referring again and again to this hour as a ‘tragedy’. It is no such thing. A tragedy is inevitable. This was not. It was murder, murder of a particularly vile and poisonous kind. Human beings have moral agency. Someone chose to hate, and chose, to kill. And now we are faced with a choice as well — to do nothing, or to reject this hatred in the strongest possible words and actions, and to refute in every way, in every forum, the philosophical foundations of anti-Semitism where they have have gained a foothold in our church and our society”.

The shootings in Pittsburgh came upon the heels of several thwarted pipe-bomb attempts earlier this week. That man’s actions are simply another example of the hatred that is being spawned in our society, a divisiveness that goes far beyond the bounds of anti-Semitism. Hard-hearted hate that resorts to violence over disagreements or distrust based on differences in political viewpoints or gender or race is almost commonplace in the United States now. To appeal to the metaphor of our story this morning, as Jesus was passing by, the bomber attempted to drown out the cries for mercy and justice. Fortunately, however, in the case of the pipe-bombs, law-enforcement was able to keep the “bomber/crowds’ efforts from becoming lethal.

“Hard-heartedness” is a phrase I’ve used a couple of times just now. And I’ve been quite deliberate in the choice of that phrase. As I mentioned last week, it hasn’t been until this fall that I’ve had the need to read carefully—over the course of several weeks—through Mark’s Gospel. And, in many of the stories we’ve heard, specific people were described by Jesus (or the narrator) as “hard-hearted”. “Hard-hearted” — a description of various folks throughout the biblical stories, including Pharaoh, Israel and Judah’s bad kings and Herod — all figures enthralled by their own power.

That description is one Jesus applies to the Pharisees when they argue about washing dishes and hands being more important than honoring parents. The designation was applied to the disciples themselves—Jesus’ closest followers—as they failed to understand the feeding of the 4000! In that account, when Jesus tells them to beware of the “yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod,” they still go back to asking about bread. In exasperation, Jesus asks, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see?” (8.17). Hard-heartedness keeps people from seeing the needs before them, keeps them from seeing solutions to problems.

Contrary to the hard-heartedness of the disciples, however, is the hopefulness of those in need. The Syro-Phoenician woman begs for her daughter’s healing; she believes that Jesus can make a change. A group of friends hope and believe that Jesus can cure a deaf/mute. Thousands of people believe that Jesus will be able to feed them, and they go away satisfied. The folks in Bethsaida believe that Jesus can give sight to a blind man. A dad, in his despair, knowing that he is unworthy, confessing his lack of belief, hopes beyond hope that Jesus can heal his son . . . and it happens. These people come to Jesus in their need; their hearts, minds and bodies are open to healing. Yet, in the midst of all of this, the disciples want to exert their privilege, keeping children at bay and arguing over who will be the “greatest”. “Hard-hearted”, indeed, in the face of Jesus’ expressive mercy.

What I believe we see in the Gospel of Mark is what I’m seeing played out in the world around us. In Mark’s Gospel there is an extended discussion of power and privilege. Whether that is the “power” of the religious elites, that is the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes, in
keeping the “impure” or “unclean” in their place. Or it is the “privilege” of Jesus’ closest associates, thinking that because of their connection with Jesus, that they can have the best seats in the coming kingdom. Or the raw “power” of the political leaders that can result in Jesus’ torture and death. All of those are held up to the bright light of Jesus’ refusal to grant those “powers” any authority, Jesus’ own refusal rightly to claim any divine power. On the contrary, over and over again, Jesus listened to the pleas for mercy. He stood up for the marginalized. He crossed lines of social and religious difference. To his peril, he criticized unjust practices and laws. Jesus’ heart was anything but hard.

As the body of Christ, as his hands and feet as well as heart today, we are called upon to be the “bright light of Jesus” in this darkening world. It is our role to be with those who’s hope is dim, who are being shouted down. It is our role to stand with Jesus in opposition to those who would call for violence to stop violence. This is not just the “role” of a vague group of Christians; it is the role of each of us in this diocese, with a new leader on her way, as well as in this room — all of us who “own the name of Jesus”. Jesus walks by us every day. Seeing him, are we among those who silence the ones who would ask for help? Or do we recognize our need, our blindness, and ask for mercy, and, having received it, then follow Jesus on “the way”?

To conclude, I ask that you open your Prayer Books to pg. 594, and join with me in reading Psalm 10. Consider, as we read this—slowly and prayerfully—that these words, so descriptive of our situation today, have been read by millions in similar situations for centuries. Let us read it responsively, by half-verse.