

March 22, 2020

4th Sunday of Lent

John 9:1-41 (The short form of Gospel omits the text in italics.)

As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth. *His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."* When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see. His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is," but others said, "No, he just looks like him." He said, "I am."

So they said to him, "(So) how were your eyes opened?" He replied, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went there and washed and was able to see." And they said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I don't know." They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a Sabbath. So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see." So some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath." (But) others said, "How can a sinful man do such signs?" And there was a division among them. So they said to the blind man again, "What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. They asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?" His parents answered and said, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue. For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; question him."

So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner." He replied, "If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see." So they said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" They ridiculed him and said, "You are that man's disciple; we are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from." The man answered and said to them, "This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything." They answered and said to him, "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out.

When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered and said, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "I do believe, Lord,"

and he worshiped him. Then Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind." Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains.

Background:

Being blind is usually associated with one's inability to see the physical world. The world in which Jesus lived understood blindness in a much broader sense. For example, Luke's Gospel states that Jesus restored many who were blind. (Luke 7:12) But the Gospel itself only records one instance of curing a physically blind person. However, Luke recounts many occasions in both his Gospel and The Acts of the Apostles where people refused to see/understand, and times when people chose to come to a new understanding, to see things in a new way.

In this text from John's Gospel, it is not the healing of a man that is the real focus of the text. John describes that incident in the first seven verses. The majority of the text is devoted to those who are trying to make sense of what has happened. Even the man's neighbors are confused about what has taken place. Some cannot even believe that he is really the same person.

Therefore, the text is mostly about the confusion and the struggle to understand what has taken place. Nowhere in the text does anyone question whether the blind man has been healed. The struggle is about what this event means for people.

Within the text there are some who are grappling with the reality that a person who was blind from birth can now see. Some others are also dealing with what it means that another person, Jesus, has been able to give sight to a person who had never in his life been able to see.

The Pharisees seize on the fact that the healing took place on the Sabbath. In their understanding, to heal is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath. They presume that because Jesus worked on the Sabbath, his healing was not pleasing to God and therefore is sinful. In contrast, the man himself struggles with who this is that has brought him his sight. In the beginning of the text, he only knows him as the man, Jesus (verse 11). Eventually he comes to look on Jesus as a prophet (verse 17). And at the end of the text, he sees him as the "Son of Man" (verse 36).

Throughout his gospel, John uses nameless people to represent the Christians of his community. Many in John's community would have been Jews who were expelled from the synagogue for their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. They were considered blind or misguided by their fellow Jews. This text speaks to them of their experience of coming to believe in Jesus. Jesus was the light of the world, and he gave true meaning to life.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of being with people who live with significant sight impairments? What is your experience of how and what they see?
2. Has there been a time in your life when you came to new appreciation of the gift of sight?

3. Has there also been an occasion when you came to realize how short-sighted or blind you had been?
4. Although Jesus has done something unheard of in his day, restoring the sight of one born blind, there is room for people to be confused, to question, and even to doubt. What does that say to you about how God desires to be present to people?
5. At the beginning of the gospel, the disciples ask Jesus about why the man is blind. Jesus replies that it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. As the gospel unfolds, what Jesus meant here becomes more apparent. Can you see in your own lifetime when God has used negative experiences to reveal the working of God?
6. Jesus does not seem to be put off by being the source of confusion and even consternation. How does that fit with your image of God and what you believe living as a disciple might mean for you?
7. Where in this text is your attention most drawn? Can you take some time now to talk with God frankly about how you are responding to this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for March 22, 2020, the Fourth Sunday of Lent

The Lord said to Samuel: "Go to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have chosen my king from among his sons." As they came to the sacrifice, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought the Lord's anointed was before him. The Lord said: "Do not judge from appearance. Not as man sees does God see; the Lord looks into the heart." Jesse presented seven sons, but Samuel said, "The Lord has not chosen any one of these. Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse replied, "There is still the youngest, who is tending sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not begin the banquet until he arrives." Jesse had the young man brought to them. He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance. The Lord said, "There—anoint him, for this is the one!" Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand,

anointed David in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord rushed upon David.

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.

In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul.

He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil;

for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage.

You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Goodness and kindness follow me all my days; I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.

Brothers and sisters: You were once darkness, but now you are light. Live as children of light, for light produces goodness and righteousness and truth. Learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the works of darkness; rather expose them. It is shameful to mention them in secret; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God be made visible through him. We have to do the works. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

He spat on the ground and made clay, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam." He went and washed, and came back able to see. His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier brought him to the Pharisees. Jesus had opened his eyes on a sabbath.

Some Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, because he does not keep the sabbath."

But others said, "How can a sinful man do such signs?" And there was division among them.

They said, "What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

They said, "We know that this man is a sinner." He replied, "If he is a sinner, I do not know. I know that I was blind and now I see. If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything."

They said, "Are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out.

When Jesus heard this, he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He said,

"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said, "The one speaking with you is he."

He said, "I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind."

Some of the Pharisees who heard this and said, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" Jesus said,

"If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains.

Excerpts from 1 Samuel 16:1B, 6-7, 10-13; Psalm 23: 1-6; Ephesians 5:8-14; and John 9:1-41