

4th Sunday of Lent (A)

We have today a theological masterpiece: St. John's story of the healing of the man born blind. This story is so artfully told by John. It is filled with symbolically important detail and it operates at several levels at the same time. The purpose of this story and all John's stories is to change us. It's about an historical event, but it is meant to change us here and now.

Jesus notices this man blind from birth. We're dealing with an event which the early Christian community remembered: this physical healing of a man who had never seen. And any biblically attentive reader would know that we are also dealing here with an archetypal story of coming to spiritual vision.

We are all meant to identify with the man born blind—why?—because we have all been born blind through original sin; sin which compromises the will and obscures the mind. We can overlook so easily that the mind is as affected by sin as is the will.

We don't see things right and the Bible loves to use the images of vision, darkness, light, blindness, etc. to get the message across to us. We are unable to see clearly the deepest truth of things and this problem is in us from the beginning—we are all born blind.

Now when Jesus sees this suffering man, He says: "**While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.**" Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the light by which we see the true nature of things. He is the light that provides vision. He is also the light by which we safely and correctly walk. How to see; how to move; how to act: all of it is conditioned upon Jesus, who is the light of the world.

Notice too, something here in the Gospel of John: there is very often a correlation with creation. As you recall, John's Gospel begins: "In the beginning was the Word." Similarly, these words are used to begin the whole Bible in Genesis. John is often preoccupied with Jesus as the creative Word of God.

And so—what is the first thing that God makes? "Let there be light and there was light." And this is why light is associated with God and the things of God.

And so, this story will be a story of re-creation, of making things new, of starting at the beginning again. Now the link to creation is intensified by the next detail we come across: Jesus, after having proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world, spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva. This, at face value, is a peculiar detail. They say, in the first century, that healers would often do things like this. They would say words and make certain gestures. One of these was the mixture of spittle with the earth. BUT, there is much more going on here—and no first century Jew would have missed the allusion to Genesis.

We hear in Genesis that God fashioned the first human beings out of the clay of the earth. Remember, he makes human figurines and then blows the breath of life into them.

What is going on here in our Gospel story is a reprising of that event. NOW, the Son of God—the Word of God made flesh—out of clay will restore the sight of the man born blind. He is going to restore creation, complete creation, that's his mission and purpose. With this mud paste he smears the man's sightless eyes.

Jesus is bringing healing to the man from out of his own substance. The spittle of Jesus, coming out of his own inner life and mixing with the earth, creates the "salve" (rooted in the word salvation) which will bring his eyes back to sight.

What is going on here is very typical of St. John; it is a kind of immersion into Christ. The man's eyes are smeared with Jesus' own self—his creative power—and that brings sight back. That brings light to this man's eyes.

Jesus then tells the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam, a small reservoir of water in Jerusalem. And he comes back able to see. And John adds, lest we miss it, **Siloam** means "**sent**." On the surface, this seems like an odd detail. But, throughout John's Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the one who's been sent by the Father. Therefore, the Pool of Siloam, the Pool of Sent, is also a symbol of Christ. The man born blind, having been salved, is now washed in the Pool of Christ. We cannot possibly miss the reference to **baptism** John makes here. What is baptism **but** immersion into Christ.

Keep in mind now, as little children come to baptism, we recognize them as people born blind, they are born in the blindness of original sin. They are salved, aren't they? Anointed. The priest anoints them with holy oils. They are thus salved and then dipped into the water, which is symbolic of Christ's own life and power. What is happening here is a kind of baptism, an immersion into Jesus Christ.

Now at this point, we could conclude that the story has reached its climax and made its point. BUT, in fact, it's just getting started, because John wants us to see this physical healing as an invitation to spiritual sight. He is very interested that we see that there is a connection between what is happening physically and what is happening spiritually.

The first and most interesting clue is the response of the formerly blind man. Subsequent to his healing, there is doubt raised about his identity and if, in fact, he IS the former blind man. And so, when questioned about this, his response is, in the Greek, *εγω ειμι*--**I am**. A phrase that Jesus uses throughout John's Gospel: **I am** the Bread of Life; **I am** the Good Shepherd; **I am** the Vine; before Abraham was, **I am**.

In these words, we hear an echo from the book of Exodus, when Moses asks God for his name. God answers: "**I am who am**." How wonderful it is that this blind man having been salved and dipped into waters symbolic of Christ, and now coming to vision, is able to identify with the very being of Jesus—I am. He has found a link to the Divine Life

which is on offer in Jesus. Every baptized person becomes another Christ. We become "christified" and so we can say in a derivative way: *εγω ειμι*—**I am**.

Next, we watch as his vision expands and deepens:

The Pharisees, angry that Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, questioned the man. He tells them that ***the man named Jesus rubbed mud on my eyes and caused me to see***. When they press him, he says: ***"this man must be a prophet."*** What is happening is that the man's new vision is deepening. He begins with "this man Jesus," then he sees him as "a prophet." When they argue with him further and begin to threaten him, he says: ***"if this man were not from God,"*** he would not be able to do what he did. The man's vision becomes deeper still. A man, a prophet, and then from God, a deepening spiritual vision is taking place.

And then, the climax of the story: completely exasperated with this man, the Pharisees throw him out. Jesus finds him and asks: ***"Do you believe in the Son of Man?"*** The former blind man says: ***"Who is he, sir that I may believe in him?"*** Jesus responds: ***"You have seen him, the one speaking with you is he."***

Jesus is asking the former blind man and **us**: Are you ready to accept the one who is more than a mere man, more than a mere prophet, more than merely someone who is from God? But rather the one who is **God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God**.

He has drawn this man who has been saved and immersed and has come to a deeper vision; He is inviting him to see all that can be seen here. And so the man says: "I do believe, Lord" and he bows down in worship. And THAT is the whole point of the story. Yes, physical healing, yes, the remaking of creation, yes, indeed! **BUT**, on a deeper level, he has come to see **spiritually** who Jesus is. And we know that he has seen perfectly clearly because he gets down and **worships** Jesus as **God**.

Remember also, Adam, in the book of Genesis, is the first priest because he walked in easy fellowship with God in the Garden. What was sin? Sin was the loss of that priesthood. Adam began to worship something other than God, he worshipped his own ego.

But NOW we see the blind man restored, the blind man re-created, he now is a kind of **new Adam**, who gets down on his knees and **worships the True God**. He has come to physical vision and he has come, more importantly, to spiritual vision.

And that is why, my brothers and sisters, this is our story, your story and my story, at this special, holy season of Lent. Our prayer, our fasting, our acts of charity must be focused on expanding our vision, seeing Jesus for who he truly is, and so be able to say, **I am** a true disciple of the living God.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella