

Fourth Sunday in Lent

“Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him...I came into this world for judgement, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind.”

John 9, 1-41



Today's gospel consists of a fascinating story in which the Pharisees, intent on trapping and discrediting Jesus, end up being caught in their own trap. They set out to establish that Jesus is a sinner, and, therefore, powerless to perform miracles. They logically conclude that the man to whom Jesus reached out could not have been blind from birth. When the man and his parents protest, they are dismissed as liars. In the eyes of the crowd who witnessed what took place, the Pharisees ended up painting themselves into a corner from which they were unable to extract themselves. They had denied the physical evidence which both they and the crowd had seen with their own eyes. They destroyed their own credibility by dismissing as a liar the man who had been healed. In word and action, Jesus demolished the moral and theological constructs that the Pharisees had created to preserve the status they had built for themselves as educated religious leaders, expert in understanding and applying Jewish law.

The upshot is that the account of the blind man's cure is pushed into the background as the antagonism between Jesus and the Pharisees is intensified. The group of nitpicking legalists insist that Jesus' actions of mixing spittle and soil to make a paste and rubbing it in the blind man's eyes constitute a breach of the law that prohibits manual work on the Sabbath. In their eyes, the compassion of Jesus counts for nothing. They become even more intent on destroying him because his compassion stands in stark comparison to the emptiness of their legalism. Ultimately, a rise in Jesus' popularity would threaten their status, security and comfort.

It is worth our digressing to take note of one of the differences between John's Gospel and the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. The latter treat the miracles of Jesus as demonstrations of his compassion, kindness and care for people in great need. John, however, beginning with the miracle of Cana and progressing through the conversion of the woman at the well, the cure of the blind man and the raising of Lazarus (next Sunday's gospel) builds a case to establish that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ of God. John puts one miracle on another, as layers of a foundation, to prove that Jesus is on a mission to bring God's love to life for a world in need of being freed from whatever is stifling it and holding it in chains, be it oppression, injustice or even religious legalism that presents God as someone intent on punishment, and meant to be feared.

Woven into today's gospel story are the images of light and darkness, repeated so often that I wonder if John thought his community would otherwise fail to see the irony, paradox and upside-down state of religious practice on which the Pharisees insisted. A blind man, to whom Jesus gives the gift of sight, embraces the added gift of faith that helps him to see that Jesus is the one who personifies the love, compassion and light of God for all in need.

Ironically, the very ones whose role is to reflect the light, love and compassion of God are blind when all this is acted out in front of them.

While today's gospel is taken from chapter 9 of John's Gospel, John has Jesus declare in Chapter 8: "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8, 12).

Jesus was the incarnation of God in our world. He gave light and love and life to those whom he encountered, by healing their brokenness and by welcoming them as his brothers and sisters, affirming and encouraging them. In his Gospel, Matthew affirms that we are icons of Jesus, as he has Jesus proclaim to his disciples and to us that we, too, are light for our world: "You are the light of the world". A contemporary paraphrase of this section of Matthew expresses it this way:

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. (The Message Bible, Matthew 5, 13-16)

In coming to grips with today's gospel there are a couple of aspects of John's skill in shaping his story that are worthy of note. Very early in the story when the disciples demonstrate that they hold to the popular belief that physical dysfunction and infirmity were punishment by God for the sins of some family member, Jesus corrects them and proceeds to say that what he is about to do for the blind man is to demonstrate God's power, goodness and compassion in action: *Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked: "Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?" Jesus said, "You're asking the wrong question. You're looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world's Light."* (John 9, 1-5)

The man who was healed responded magnificently, carrying out to the letter the mission Jesus had just articulated for himself and for all who would follow him. By courageously confronting the narrow-mindedness and legalism of the Pharisees, this man voiced what the mercy, goodness and justice of God look like in action. His courage challenges us to do likewise: to light up the world with the goodness of God.

Note, too, how Jesus went about healing the man in front of him. He used mud—*adamah*, (that's where the name Adam comes from) the stuff of God's earliest creative acts—to restore the man born blind to the fullness of his humanity. Moreover, in John's mind, the mission God gave Jesus would come to completion on the Cross on Golgotha, where Jesus's final words were: "It is finished!" (John 19, 30) Today's gospel invites us to stop and consider where and how we are blind, wilfully or inadvertently. It also reminds us how Jesus insists that our role as Christians is to reveal God's goodness, love mercy and compassion to the world by the way we live. Do we dare illuminate our world by letting our light shine?