

### ***What the Blind Man Saw***

In the name of him who gives sight to the blind, dear friends in Christ: Some years back there was a film called *What the Deaf Man Heard*. It was one of those Hallmark made for television things – which are usually unbearably schmaltzy and sentimental, but this one wasn't that bad. Anyway, the plot involved some villains scheming to commit a crime. They make their plans in the presence of a guy whom everyone thinks is deaf, so they're not worried about him spilling the beans. As it turns out, he's not deaf at all. If I recall correctly, the story is about him trying to thwart their plan without revealing the fact that he *can* hear. I mention this because there's something similar going on in today's Gospel reading. And so, I thought a good theme for this morning's message might be: *What the Blind Man Saw*. Here we've got a man born blind who ends up seeing more clearly than the villains in the story really know, and this as a result of not one, but two life changing miracles. One of these miracles takes place in plain sight. And the other ... well, you'd have to be blind not to see it.

The first miracle, the granting of sight to a man born blind, is remarkable not only for the simple wonder of the healing power Jesus demonstrates by performing the miracle, but also for the way Jesus goes about it. Picture this now: Jesus is in the city of Jerusalem. He's leaving the Temple complex. He's just been embroiled in a heated exchange with the religious authorities there. The conversation ended abruptly when he claimed to be God. That made them furious. You, the reader of John's Gospel, know that his claim is true; but the religious authorities are blind to this truth. So, they pick up stones to execute him for blasphemy. But his time had not yet come, so he leaves them for the time being, passing with his disciples right through the middle of the angry mob. It's as he is leaving the Temple grounds, passing out one its gates, that he spies the blind man. This fellow has chosen a spot just outside the temple to beg for handouts. We get the impression that this is his usual place and that people are used to seeing him here. Like many others who had to beg for bread, he probably figures that people on their way to worship are more likely to be charitable.

And it's right here, in front of the man, that Jesus stops suddenly. The disciples, very conscious of the fact that they've just narrowly escaped being stoned to death along with their Master, are probably thinking, "*Maybe we should keep moving until we're safely out of harm's way.*" But Jesus has a teaching point he wants to make. He's not about to be rushed along. So, after a brief discussion on the origin of the man's problem, the disciples watch as Jesus treats the man. Though he could just speak a word and have it done, he doesn't seem to be in a hurry. First, he spits on the dusty ground. Then with the spittle he works up a ball of mud between his fingers. They watch him smear the mud over the man's eyes – a procedure more likely to blind a man who can see than help a man who can't. And they hear as he tells this fellow to go all the way down the hill, through all the narrow, winding streets to the lowest point in the city. There he is to wash in the pool of Siloam. Then they go their way, and the man heads off down to the pool. The disciples, who didn't get to see the miracle take place—indeed, who didn't even know for sure if there was going to be a miracle, were probably wondering, "*What was that all about?*"

And hopefully, by now, you're asking the same question: *What was that all about?* Well, there are two things. First, it's about *Creation*. Jesus has just got himself into hot water with the religious authorities by claiming to be God. Now he proves his claim. And he proves it by reminding the onlookers of the time God made the first man. You recall that then, on the sixth day of Creation, God rolled up his sleeves, hunkered down on the ground, and formed Adam

from clay he made by combining the dust of the earth with water. Now Jesus reenacts the scene in order to create for this man what he is lacking. By using the mud as he does to restore the man's sight, Jesus is saying, "*I've done this before. Let me show you how I did it.*"

The other thing Jesus is illustrating by healing the man this way is *Re-Creation*, or *Rebirth*, if you prefer. The man was first born blind. Now Jesus is going to give a new life with sight—and not just physical vision, but spiritual vision as well. The man is going to be recreated, or born again, whole. So, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus uses imagery that looks a lot like Baptism to heal him. That's where a Christian is given new life through the washing of rebirth. That's where we are given spiritual sight, which is faith in Jesus. And Baptism is, as we know, a gift of God that combines water and the Word – both of which in this case proceed directly from the mouth of Jesus. Then Jesus sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam – which as we are told means "Sent", or a better translation, "the Sent One".

That might seem like a strange name for a pool of water – unless you know why it's called that. It turns out that before about 600 BC, when King Hezekiah reigned, the city of Jerusalem had no natural water source within its walls. No river ran through it, there were no wells, and no springs inside the wall. In those days that could be big trouble. If an enemy army lay siege to the city, the defenders wouldn't be able to hold out very long with no water. So, Hezekiah ordered a fix to the problem. Outside the city in the Kidron Valley was a spring known as the Gihon but popularly called "*the Virgin*". They hid the spring by covering it over. And through a system of natural caves and man-made tunnels, they channeled its water underneath the wall where it ended up in the pool of Siloam. Now, think about that: the water that provided life for the city in time of crisis was sent from "*the Virgin*" to a pool called "*the Sent One*". And not coincidentally, one of the names Jesus often uses to refer to himself is "the One whom the Father sent." Do you see it? Here the picture of Christian Baptism is laid out beautifully: Jesus sends this man to wash himself and to be reborn and restored in the "*Sent One*" born of the "*Virgin*".

We understand that's exactly what happens to people in Baptism: They are washed in the water and Word of Christ – and they come away seeing; not in a physical sense, rather they are given faith, that is, spiritual sight. *That's* the second miracle that takes place in this morning's Gospel reading. Working through the washing of water and of the Word of Jesus, this man born spiritually blind is given faith to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and his Savior. Meanwhile, those who have not had their spiritual eyes opened, categorically refuse to see the evidence right before them.

The story is about being born blind. All of us are in a spiritual sense. And people who are blind can only make blind assumptions about the spiritual world around them. Take for example the blind question the disciples ask: "*Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?*" It only made sense to them: his blindness was *obviously* a punishment inflicted by God for someone's sin. The trouble was that either way they worked it out, it didn't seem like God was being fair. What could a baby do before it was born that would deserve this terrible sentence? Or on the other hand, why take it out on the poor kid if his parents were at fault? Jesus opens their blind eyes: "*This isn't about the sin of this man or his parents – his blindness is an opportunity for the grace and love of God to be revealed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who Sent Me.*"

Now, on the surface, it may appear that Jesus is just referring the miracle of healing he is about to perform. But notice that he says, "we must do" this work. We can't all perform miracles of healing; but we can share the truth about Jesus that is able to give sight to the

spiritually blind. More than that, we can all show God's love and mercy to those who are in need of help. God gives us people with special needs (like the blind) so that his love can be shown in our actions toward them. According to our spiritual blindness, when we come across someone with an illness or defect we can only see a tragedy of fate, or the punishment of an angry God. But according to our spiritual sight we see a precious gift that God has given us to make his love known in the world.

Another example of the spiritual blindness in which we are born is shown in the way the Pharisees see themselves and others. They are quick to point out the faults of others, but they are totally blind to their own faults. They assume that the man whom Jesus gave the gift of sight must be a terrible sinner – that's why he was born blind. So, they would never think of lifting a finger to help such a person. *"Why, if God has chosen to punish him, who am I to make things easier for him?"* This is nothing more than the Law of Karma. It's the pitiless pagan belief that drives most of the world's false religions. It knows nothing of God's love or mercy. And now, even though the man has been healed, the Pharisees close their eyes to the very logical and apparent truths he lays out before them. They also assume that Jesus must be a terrible sinner because he does not follow all the restrictive Sabbath rules they've made up and added to God's Word. They can't see the good he is doing because he's not following their silly traditions. But their greatest blindness is that they do not know that they are blind. They are blind to their own sin and their need for a Savior.

And this is a theological ditch we can all blindly stumble into. It happens when we hear God's Law and we manipulate it, or limit its scope, or water it down so that it doesn't apply to us. And then, like the Pharisees, we add on other things to camouflage our failures. How often have you heard something in the Bible and thought to yourself, *"That was for then, it doesn't apply to modern living in today's world"*? Or, *"As long as my intent is good, it's not really sin"*? Or *"Surely God understands my situation and doesn't mind if overlook this or that command"*? Or, *"It's okay if I set aside this command if I make up for it by working extra hard with this one over here."* This kind of thinking is nothing more than an attempt to see ourselves as better than we really are. It's looking in the mirror of the Law and choosing not to see the filth and corruption that clings to us. They are blind attempts to justify ourselves before God. *"See, Lord? I'm not such a sinner after all."* And as Jesus said, *"those who are well have no need of a physician"*; or to quote him in today's lesson: *"because you claim you can see, your guilt remains."*

But today's lesson was given to us to remind us that we were all born spiritually blind. And we can ask, *"Who sinned, me, or my parents that I was born spiritually blind?"* And the answer is: Yes. Both. We inherit our blindness because we were conceived in sin. And we perpetuate our blindness with our own sin. But our blindness is not a punishment: it is the consequence of sin's corruption. Sinners are by their very nature unable to see and discern the things of God. We cannot trust our blind assumptions about God or the way he works in the world. If spiritually we use as our standards such things as *"I think that God will"* or *"I feel that God wants"* or *"I know in my heart this is right"* we are certain to stray from the path of God's truth. And if we lead others the same way, then it will be a case of the blind leading the blind, and both will fall into the ditch together.

But because we know that we are blind, we know that in order to see, we have to go to the source of true spiritual sight: The Lord Jesus Christ. And we know that the place we come into contact with him is in his Word. That's where we first met him: when we were washed in him while his words were heard, and we were given the gift of faith. And just as the man in the reading, who is led to greater degrees of understanding by continued contact with Jesus, so we

too gain greater spiritual sight by continuing to listen to his voice and coming into contact with him in his Sacrament. It isn't always easy or pleasant. Coming into the light of Christ means that our deeds of darkness will be exposed. But they are what cause our blindness – and until we admit that we are blind, we cannot be healed.

But when we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us. His blood shed for us washes away the sin, and his righteousness becomes our covering. Then we will live as children of the Light. And as children of the Light, we will be empowered by his Holy Spirit to do the work of the Father who sent him. Therefore, may he continue to shine his Light into our lives, so that we will see what the blind man saw, and that the work of God may be displayed in us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***