

A Real Eye-Opener

In the name of him who is the Light of the world, dear friends in Christ: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This was the question the disciples put to Jesus as they were passing by a beggar who had been blind from birth. It seemed like very reasonable question – and not just to them: a lot of people were grappling with the same question. And not just about this particular case; they were wondering about all kinds of similar situations: infants born crippled, missing limbs, deaf, having learning disabilities, what have you. The question was “Why would the Lord do such a thing?” And the basic answer seemed obvious. It was clearly divine punishment for sin. After all, everyone knows instinctively that the Lord rewards those who do good with health, wealth, success, and happiness; and he inflicts illness, poverty, failure, and misery on those who do evil. It’s only right. So, there could be no doubt about it. This man’s blindness had to be the result of *someone* doing *something* terrible. It would *have to have been* something *especially* despicable to warrant such a dreadful curse. Imagine: never being able to see, not even having a distant memory of your mother’s face or the beauty of God’s creation, having no concept of color; but instead always living in black, unremitting darkness. That would be awful. And someone had to be to blame for it. Anyone could see that. The only question was, who?

And the trouble was that none of the answers proved to be satisfactory. I mean, if it were the parents, why not punish them directly? Why take it out on their poor child? Why should he bear the penalty of his parents’ guilt? That didn’t seem fair. But on the other hand, if being born blind was a punishment for his own sin, then he’d have to have done something really rotten while still in the womb. And that didn’t seem very likely. What horrendous crime could he possibly have committed before birth? Certainly nothing to deserve the condition he had. So that didn’t make sense either. Then again, maybe it was some sort of preemptive judgment: a punishment in advance for a sin that he *would have* committed later in life if he could see. But then the Lord would be punishing him for a sin that he wouldn’t end up committing; and *that* wouldn’t be right. Anyway you looked at this, it didn’t look like God was being fair – and no one wanted to accuse the Lord of being anything but perfectly just. And so you see, the whole question was a real conundrum.

To everyone except Jesus, that is. And what he tells his disciples is essentially this: you’re not looking at this correctly. You only think you see what’s going on here. You imagine that you know what the Lord is up to – as if you could see through his eyes – and that this man’s blindness is a manifestation of divine justice and punishment for sin. But the truth is, you don’t see. Because of your faulty assumptions, because of your worldly way of thinking, and because of your arrogance in pretending to see through the eyes of the Lord, you are blind to the truth.

And Jesus explains what the truth is – which is a real eye-opener for his disciples. “This man’s blindness is not the result of his or his parents’ sin. No, in the Lord’s wisdom he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him. *We* must work the works of Him who sent me while it is day; for night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.” That’s quite a mouthful; and an entirely different way of seeing things – and so, it requires a bit of explanation.

You see, people had been assuming that the work of God was being displayed in this man; namely, God’s work of justice – his punishment of those who do evil. That’s why they

thought the blindness was the result of someone's sin. But the truth is that this fallen world of ours does not operate according to God's justice – at least, not at the present. And for that we can be extremely grateful; because if all there were was God's justice – if that's what we saw – then every sinner who ever lived, including all of us, would already be condemned to an eternity in hell. We'd be cast into outer darkness where we would see nothing: no light, no goodness, no end of pain and suffering; just everlasting separation from the gracious presence of God.

But that's not what we see. Instead, we see this world continuing in its fallen state. We see the Lord withholding his hand of judgment. We see sin not being instantly punished. And therefore what we see at the present is not God's justice; but rather what we see is his mercy. We see his forbearance, his patience, his kindness, and his gentleness as with immense longsuffering he calls sinners to repentance, to forgiveness, and to life through faith in Jesus, his Son. In short, what we see is God's love in Christ operating in the world – in this fallen, imperfect, and often tragic world, where things are not the way they were created to be, and where the curse caused by our sin is in full effect. And this curse is in effect precisely so that we will see the brokenness and futility of life under sin's curse and so long to be free of it, to be saved from it, and to be restored and made whole again in Christ.

That's what's really going on all around us. The problem is we like the first view of things better, the one that says that what we're seeing is God's justice. Why? It's because for most of us most of the time things are going pretty well. Generally speaking we are not physically blind, sick, suffering, in poverty and misery. And from an individual point of view, in a world that operates according to God's justice that means the Lord is pleased with me and my behavior. It means I'm one of the good guys who the Lord rewards and upon whom he smiles. It means *I'm not a sinner* – at least not so bad a sinner as to incur the wrath of God. Being sinners, by our very nature, we prefer this view of things. It avoids the inconvenient truth of *my* sin, which I'd rather not see. No, I can tell myself, the sinners are the ones whom God punishes with blindness, poverty, misery, and so on. It's the other guy. My life is pretty good; therefore *I* am pretty good. And because that's the way I see things – because I'm blind to my sin – when something in my life goes bad, I can shake my fist angrily at the Lord and say, "Why are you treating me this way? You're not being fair!" Does that sound familiar? Have you ever felt that way? It's because you were born blind in sin. All of us were. And that's why Jesus' work on this blind man is so instructive to us – it displays for us the work of God.

Notice how it's Jesus that initiates the healing. He approaches the blind man, not the other way around. He seeks and saves the lost. The lost do not find him. And then Jesus does something that should strike us as strange indeed: he spits on the dusty ground, mixes up some mud, and smears it in the man's eyes. Think about that: in other episodes, Jesus merely touches people to heal them or he speaks a word and it's done. So what's up with the mud? Why does he do that? Especially considering that smearing mud in someone's eyes is more likely to blind a sighted person than give sight to a blind one. The answer is that there's a message in Jesus' actions. And what he's saying is "Watch this: I've done this before." It harks back to Genesis chapter two, when the Lord forms the first man from the dust of the earth. Now here he is recreating for this man what was lost, as it were, with a mixture of dust and moisture that has come straight from the mouth of the Lord. That sounds rather baptismal, by the way; and if there's any doubt about it, Jesus then sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam.

That too should strike us as strange. We know this episode took place on the Temple mount, just as Jesus and his disciples were leaving the sacred courts. And now Jesus sends him to what is the farthest corner of the city from where they are, down through winding streets and alleys to the city's lowest point, where the Pool of Siloam was. Again, Jesus could have

healed him on the spot. Or he could have chosen a closer pool of water, like Bethesda, which was very close by. But no, he sends this blind man, now with mud in his useless eyes, staggering through the crowds and confusion of a busy city to a pool half a mile away. And mind you, Jesus has said nothing about healing the man. This poor guy is sitting there one-minute begging as he always did, and along comes this stranger (he doesn't know who Jesus is), who then smears mud in his face, and tells him to get washed. Amazingly he goes as directed all the way to Siloam, a name which means (not coincidentally) "The Sent One" or you could also translate it "The One Made an Apostle". And there the man washes in the Sent One (that is, in Jesus who was sent by his Father), and suddenly, for the first time in his life, he can see. His eyes are opened. And too he is made an apostle – one who goes forth talking about Jesus and what he's done.

Though at first, his understanding is sketchy at best. He can see physically; but spiritual sight comes to him in a series of steps. And what's interesting is that it's the spiritual blindness of others that helps him to see the truth. At first he returns home. His neighbors are astonished. "Isn't this the guy who used to sit and beg?" Some say yes; others say, no, it only looks like him – and this despite the fact that he keeps telling them that he's the same guy. Some folks deny what they see and hear. Why? Because it doesn't fit their world view. Remember? From their way of looking at things, he's blind because of sin. In some way or another, he deserves it; unlike me. So if he's healed now, it messes up my whole understanding of God's way of dealing with the world. Therefore it can't be the same guy.

This comes into even clearer focus when the man is taken before the Pharisees. They are outwardly the best and most righteous people around – and therefore the most blind to their own sins. They demand to know how he gained his sight. He explains what Jesus said and did. And they begin arguing. Some claim this is proof that Jesus is a sinner. After all, he made mud and healed on the Sabbath Day when the Law says everyone must rest. He's in violation of the Sabbath. To them is proof that he's no man of God. But others say, "Yes, but no sinner could do what Jesus did." They're confused. So they ask the man, "What do you say about him?"

"He's a prophet", the man replies. It's true and he's getting closer; but it's an incomplete confession of who Jesus is. He doesn't see the whole truth just yet. Well, the argument continues among the Pharisees. The deniers insist that he must not really have been born blind, so they call in the parents to testify. They confirm what the Pharisees don't want to hear, that yes, he was born blind; but out of fear the parents offer no more. They have no explanation for how he came to see. So the Pharisees call the man back in – who's had a bit more time to think about all he's seen and heard. Again the Pharisees accuse Jesus of being a sinner, to which the man says, "I don't know if he's a sinner or not. All I know is that he gave me my sight." Their arguing continues, and the more it does, the more the man becomes convinced that what Jesus' detractors are saying doesn't ring true. He begins to see their blindness in refusing to acknowledge that Jesus is indeed sent from God and doing his work. When asked again, he confesses the truth he's come to see. And for his bold confession he suffers expulsion. "How dare you, a sinner, presume to teach us? Get out!" Thus they prove the old proverb: There are none so blind as those who refuse to see.

And it's then that Jesus comes to the man to reveal himself fully and complete what is still lacking in his faith. For the first time the man lays his eyes on the One who healed him, though he does not, as yet, recognize Jesus. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asks. "Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him?" "You now see and hear him" Jesus tells him. And so the man confesses his faith and *worships* Jesus. That is to say, he acknowledges Jesus as

his Savior and his God. His confession is now complete. Now he truly sees the One who is the Truth for who and what he is.

This is the work of God being displayed in him: his coming to see the Lord Jesus for who he is and being restored by him. And the thing to see is that this same work of God is in progress in each of us, because we are all born spiritually blind in sin. We don't see as we should. We only think we do. And what Jesus does for this blind man, he does for all of us. How? In the same he did it in the story. He comes to us where we are – he finds us when we are unable to seek him. And then he begins his recreating work in us first through Baptism. It's there that he reveals our guilt, brings us to repentance, and washes away our sins; he opens our eyes of faith, and gives us his Holy Spirit to enlighten our hearts and minds. We are washed in the Sent One. And then through various trials of opposition and through his disclosure of himself through his Word, we come to know him better. As we mature in the faith, we come increasingly to see who he really is, our faith is refined, and we learn to confess his whole truth and to worship him. This is an ongoing process. It's what being a disciple is all about – learning to know Jesus, and learning to see things correctly, by the light of his truth.

And those Jesus makes his disciples, he also makes his apostles: that is his sent ones who go forth doing the works of God – just as Jesus said “*We* must do the works of Him who sent me while it is day.” “Wait a minute”, you may say, “How can I do the works of God? I can't heal anyone who was born blind.” No you can't. But there's a lot more to the work of God than that. Recall that what the Lord is doing now in this time, which is the Day of Grace, is dealing with the world in his mercy, not his judgment. And *that* you can do. Just as the Lord is dealing with blind sinners in mercy, patience, kindness, forgiveness, gentleness, and love, so can you. In fact, it's those who have disabilities of various kinds – whether they were born with them or acquired them later in life – who need your acts of love, mercy, and kindness the most. In Christ we now know to see them not as the subjects of God's punishment as did the disciples and the Pharisees; but rather as opportunities the Lord gives to us to serve. We do God's work by showing them God's love in Christ – by providing for their needs, helping them, making up for what they lack with charity and kindness. And thus we will be doing God's work in the world. And that *will* help to open the eyes of the spiritually blind. In our confession of Jesus, in our sharing his Word and proclaiming what he's done for us, and also in our acts of love for each other and especially for the disadvantaged, people will come to see and know Christ as we do. Their eyes will also be opened to Jesus and his truth. And they too will come to know him as Savior and Lord.

This is what Paul is saying in today's Epistle: “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk therefore as children of the light.” May he who called us out of darkness and gave us the gift of spiritual sight, give us also the grace to walk as children of Him who is the Light of the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!