

Born Blind

In the name of him who is the Light of the world, dear friends in Christ: born blind. Think about what that means. Imagine having come into this world in utter darkness, deprived of the sense of sight ... never seeing the light of day or the faces of your mother and father – or any of the rest of your family – or even your own reflection in a mirror. Never seeing your home or yard or the town you live in. Think what that would be like ... how confining it would be to never see a landscape, a horizon, the distant trees and ridges. I mean, if you couldn't see, your world would be pretty much confined to what you could reach out and touch at any given moment. From your perspective anything beyond that might as well not be there. You'd only be comfortable with extremely familiar places – places where you already knew where everything was. So many steps this way to the closet, so many that way to the bathroom, and so on. To go anywhere new, you'd need a guide to lead you. Can you imagine what that would be like? How dependent you would be on others?

And if you'd been born blind, what do you suppose you would imagine having the sense of sight to be like? A person who had sight and then lost it would at least be able to picture things in their minds. They'd have memories based on sight with which they could use their imagination; but if you never saw anything, how in the world could you even think about what would be like to be able to see? And what would you do with a concept like color? To hear someone say that a flower is red or that the sky is blue ... what would that mean to you? And what about your dreams? Would they be as dark as the rest of your world?

I want you to think about what it would mean to you to be born blind – how that would have changed your life and complicated things for you. This is more than a game of “let's pretend”. It's worth thinking about if for no other reason than because we often take the most basic blessings for granted. An exercise like this can help you appreciate the gift of sight that much more and help you to remember to thank God for it. But today I have another reason for asking you to think about it. The fact is that in a spiritual sense all of us *were* born blind. Like Jesus told Nicodemus, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the Spirit – which is to say that no one can see reality the way it is unless he sees it by the light of Jesus. With respect to things spiritual, apart from the illumination of the Spirit of Christ, we have all the same disadvantages as a person who has never seen. We can't even imagine what it would be like to be able to see. To be perfectly accurate, it's even worse than that because we suffer from the delusion that we can see things spiritual. Part of our spiritual blindness is the deception of thinking that we can see.

This is clearly illustrated in the beatitudes of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Using our natural abilities, we look into the world and who is it that we would say are the most blessed by God? Why, it would be the high and mighty, the proud, the rich, the movers and shakers—they're the ones who are blessed. It's obvious; as plain as the nose on your face. But Jesus says no, it's the humble, the poor in spirit, the oppressed—*they're* the ones who are *truly* blessed. Again, we could look to see who we would say are the ones living the most righteous lives. We'd say it was those who are known for doing good works, who are famed for their philanthropy and charitable giving; people who devote their entire lives to the service of the Lord, who abstain from the comforts and joys of family life to give themselves entirely to prayer, fasting, and meditation. *These* are the saints of God. But Jesus says no, the truly blessed are the ones who despair over their sins, who go about mourning over their failures to be what God demands – the ones who are never satisfied with themselves, who are starving for a

righteousness they know that they cannot attain. Or again, we look out into the world and who is it that we would say are advancing God's cause and doing the most for his kingdom? Why surely it's those who are drawing the biggest crowds, the people who are well liked, famous, and held in high esteem. Jesus says no, the truly blessed are the ones who are hated for their message and who are denounced and persecuted for their testimony about Jesus.

In each case true spiritual sight, that is, sight made possible by the light of Christ, sees something entirely different than what natural sight observes. It's this sort of sight that enables us to see a more precious treasure in the widow's two mites than in the rich man's heavy bags of gold. But the point to be made is that such sight does not come to us naturally. It's only made possible by knowing Jesus and listening to him. Only by his illumination can we overcome the darkness of imagining that we can see in order to see things in a spiritual sense as they truly are.

That brings us to today's lesson: the story of the man born blind. He sits just outside the Temple gate begging for coins. He's been doing it for many years. Everyone who passes by going to or coming from worship sees him (though usually they pretend not to). But what do they see when they look at him? Using what they believe to be their powers of spiritual observation, they see someone cursed by God. Surely there's a terrible sin hidden in his past that accounts for such a wretched fate. The only thing they can't figure out is whose sin it was. Some say it must have been his parents, because there's no way he could have done anything so evil before he was born to deserve such a dreadful sentence. Others say that doesn't make sense. If it had been his parents who sinned, God wouldn't be fair in taking it out on their poor kid. Therefore it must have been something he did before he was born. Still others surmise that it was probably on account of something he would have done later in life if he had been able to see – God simply judged him in advance. Others argue, "How could God possibly punish him for a sin that he hadn't yet committed and now won't commit because he's blind and can't do it?"

It is for all of them a baffling mystery. But what I want you to see is that what's really going on here is that all these people are only stumbling around in the dark. They are spiritually blind and only imagining that they can see. They suppose that they can see what God is up to, what he is doing in this man's life and why. And the disciples of Jesus are just as blind. Fortunately, in their groping for truth they have the good sense to ask Jesus to shed some light on their darkness.

Jesus' reply is not what they expect: "You think you see something bad here. You look at his condition and think you see the wrath of God against sin in action; but you're wrong. God is not punishing anyone by this man's blindness. In truth, his blindness serves a good and higher purpose. He was born blind so that God's work could be displayed in him."

That answer must have floored the disciples. I know it still disturbs a lot of people today. They assume that Jesus meant that the whole thing was God's set up for him to have an opportunity to showcase his divine healing powers. And they ask incredulously, "You mean to say that this guy has had to suffer thirty years or more of blindness and the consequent poverty, humiliation, malnutrition, and who knows what other misery that's gone along with it, just so Jesus could waltz by one day and heal him? How sick is that? Surely God could have displayed his work in the world without making anyone suffer so much for so long. It's just not fair."

This, however, is only more spiritual blindness speaking. There's a whole lot more going on in this story than a simple healing miracle. And calling upon Jesus to lead us and to shine on us the light of his Holy Spirit, let's consider what some of those things are.

First, and perhaps most obviously, the man's blindness was the cause of the disciples' interest in him, which in turn led to his encounter with Jesus. Say it another way, his apparent misfortune led directly to his coming to know and trust the Lord. Is that so unjust? Forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life in glory all his, and what occasioned his meeting the Lord was his having been born blind. Is that so bad? Wouldn't you rather suffer things a thousand times worse if in the end it led to your coming to know Jesus, than to live a happy, healthy, and care-free life in this world and then die without coming to faith in him? Is *any* so-called misfortune really a bad thing if it plays a key part in bringing people to faith in Jesus? I'd say this world could use a few more such misfortunes; wouldn't you?

And then there's the greater spiritual truths being taught in this story. Think about it: you've got this guy constantly sitting just outside the Temple gate. Most people assume that he deserves his fate on account of some terrible sin – either his own or his folks'; it really doesn't matter: he's got a sin problem. Surely he's heard this over and over again. And no doubt he's had to admit that he is indeed a sinner. That much he can see. The point is that he's outside the Temple – the Temple that exists for the primary purpose of offering sacrifices to God for the forgiveness of sins. So, why doesn't he go in? The answer is that he's a sinner and he's not welcome in there. Who's in there keeping him out? Ironically, it's the Pharisees who think they haven't got any sin. They go in to offer their sacrifices; but they do so mechanically and ritualistically – because God demands sacrifices, not because they have any sense of their own guilt. Do you see how messed up and backwards the situation is?

Then follow this through: it's to the one guy who can see that he's a sinner (even though he can't see) that Jesus reveals himself as the Savior. Meanwhile, the naturally sighted Pharisees, who falsely believe they can see the blind man's sin even while failing to see their own, never do come to see Jesus as their Savior – even in spite of startling evidence that they can see: the healing of a man born blind. (I hope you caught that the first time because I'm pretty sure I can't repeat it.)

What I'm driving at is that the work of God on display in this story is more than just the healing of one man born blind. It illustrates the miracle Jesus does for all of us who were also born spiritually blind. You'll note too that the man doesn't come looking for Jesus. He doesn't even know who Jesus is. He's just sitting there asking for handouts and being silently condemned by the people who pass by. Even the disciples have no interest in helping him; they just want their theology question answered. It's Jesus who reaches out, takes the initiative, and who does God's work on the day of man's rest. It all stresses the grace and action of God and how we are merely the passive recipients of his gifts.

But what I really want you to pay attention to is *how* Jesus gives sight to this man. I mean, c'mon, it's Jesus. He could have simply spoken a word and the man would have had his sight. Instead, Jesus goes through this elaborate thing of spitting and making mud and smearing it in the guy's eyes, and then telling him to go all the way down to the pool of Siloam, which was just about the farthest place he could have sent him that was still inside the city. What's that all about? Good question. The answer, like Jesus said, was to display the work of God. What work? Well, how about creation for starters. By making the mud and putting it in the man's eyes, Jesus was effectively saying, "Watch this: I've done it before, when I rolled up my sleeves and made the first man from the dust of the ground. But that man, along with all of his descendants, lost the gift of spiritual sight when he fell into sin. So now I'm redoing it."

And then he sends him to the pool of Siloam. The name of the pool means “the sent one”, which just happens to be the term Jesus uses most often in John’s Gospel to refer to himself: “the Sent One of the Father.” It’s there that the miracle takes place. The man goes into the pool – the pool that mysteriously shares a name with Jesus, and there he washes away the dirt and comes up seeing. All this to display the work of God – which by now I hope you see is the work that God does in Baptism. That’s where we are recreated, reborn, washed in Jesus, cleansed of sin, and given his Spirit to illumine our hearts and minds so that we who were born blind can see.

The last thing I’d have you see is that it doesn’t stop there. Jesus doesn’t just turn on the lights for this guy and then leave him to figure things out for himself. He comes to him to reveal more about who he is and what he’s come to do. The man still has blind spots. He doesn’t see it all at first. Neither do the disciples who have been with Jesus for a long time. Every day they spend with him they learn to see more of the truth – the truth that is almost always completely opposite to what their natural sight tells them. And so the work of God goes on being displayed in the formerly blind man and the disciples as they learn to see more and more by the light of Christ.

This same work of God continues to go on being displayed in you and me. It happens as we learn to see the world through the cross of Jesus, where what looks bad is actually for our good, where what seems to be defeat is in fact our victory, and where what appears to be the end turns out to be our new beginning.

And it all begins by recognizing the truth that we were born blind and in sin. May this be our starting point every day so that the work of God may continue to be displayed in us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!