

SUNDAY OF THE BLIND MAN



In the Gospel of John of Jesus healing the Man born Blind, we hear the marvelous description of a man who had never been able to see, when he is cured, however, he will be able to see Jesus as his Lord, something the religious leaders were unable to do.

Whose sin?

The disciples ask Jesus, "*Why was he born blind? Was it because of his own sins or the sins of his parents?*" There was in people's minds at that time a close link between sin and a chronic sickness or disability. One was a punishment for the other. We remember when the paralyzed man was let down through the roof at the feet of Jesus seeking to be healed of his disability, surprisingly, Jesus' first words to him were, "*Your sins are forgiven.*"

Here, however, Jesus changes the direction of their question. "*His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins. He is blind so that God's power might be seen at work in him.*" He will be the focus of one of the seven great signs which Jesus is seen to perform in this gospel.

A life of light

The story keeps emphasizing that the man was blind from birth. To heal him then means the beginning of a completely new life, a life where he can see. He will enter a new world of brightness. Not to know Jesus is to live in blindness and darkness. In fact, this story is an illustration of Jesus' statement: "*I am the light of the world*".

In the beginning of the story, the man is blind - he cannot see; he is a beggar - he has nothing; he is an outsider - no one accepts him. His affliction indicates that he is a sinner or the son of a sinner and so a person to be avoided. In the end, when he is able to see, he becomes a disciple of Jesus. In terms of the Gospel, it is the logical and inevitable outcome. Once we really see Jesus, we are hooked.

In the beginning he was blind, he was in darkness. In the end he is in the light, because Jesus is the Light of the world.

Mud and saliva

Jesus heals the man's eyes. In doing so he uses mud and saliva. People believed that saliva could heal and they were right. We know now that our saliva is a kind of antibiotic. That is why dogs and other animals lick their wounds.

Here, Jesus by using mud also helps us to remember God used mud to create Adam, the first man. Here, too, there is a new creation. Jesus is making a new man. St Paul calls the baptised Christian a "new person". Then Jesus tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. This is symbolic of his baptism.

Is it the same man?

After his healing, the man's friends and his neighbours discuss his identity. Is it really him? But the beggar was blind and this man can see. Because he has changed, some people cannot recognise him. When we are baptised, when we become committed followers of Christ, we too should change. Maybe some people will say, "You are not like the way you were before! You are not the same person since your conversion and baptism." In fact, that is what they should be able to say.

Not keeping the rules

Because they are not satisfied, neighbours bring the blind man to see the Pharisees. They are the sources of orthodox thinking and fidelity to the Law.

In fact, Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath and the methods he used were a violation of the letter of the Law. Their argument went, that if Jesus truly were from God, he would not be breaking the law. On the other hand, if he was a sinner, how could he do these things? Sinners cannot do the work of God. This led to division among the Pharisees themselves because they refused to follow out their own logic.

The Pharisees then interrogate the blind man. He keeps telling them just what Jesus had done for him. For him the answer is quite simple: Jesus is a prophet. Sabbath or no Sabbath, his actions are clearly from God. *"How could a man who is a sinner do things like this?"* But the Pharisees cannot accept his argument. If they accept, then they have to accept Jesus and his teaching also. So they do not even want to accept that the man was ever blind!

Avoiding trouble

Now they turn to question the man's parents. The parents know very well that their son was born blind but they are afraid to say so. They know that now if anyone says Jesus is the Messiah they will be expelled from the synagogue. They will no longer be part of the community. Many Jewish Christians, known to the readers of this gospel, would have had this experience. Later on, thousands of Christians would have a similar experience, ostracized for their faith in Christ.

Unfortunately, the man's parents were prepared to sacrifice their integrity rather than suffer such a punishment. So the parents push the argument back to the son: he is an adult; he is well able to answer for himself.

Who is really blind?

The Pharisees again ask the man to tell the truth. *"We know that Jesus is a sinner. He cannot do these things."* The healed man stands his ground: *"I don't know if he is a sinner. I do know I was blind and now I can see."* For the umpteenth time they ask, *"What did he do?"* Exasperated, the man replies: *"I told you already. But you will not listen."* He begins to mock them. He is more daring now, not afraid. *"You want to be his disciples too?"*

This makes them angry and they begin to abuse him. *"You are his disciple. We are Moses' disciples. No one knows where that fellow [Jesus] came from."* In a sense that is perfectly true because the Word was with God from the very beginning. On the other hand, Jesus' origins are perfectly obvious as the cured man is well aware: *"How strange! He cured me. Sinners cannot do such things. God does not listen to sinners. God listens to those who respect him and do his will. Never before was it heard that anyone had cured a man born blind. If Jesus is not from God he could not do this."*

Expulsion

The Pharisees are now very angry. They resort to the traditional belief: sickness as punishment for sin. *"You were born and raised in sin. You want to teach us?"* And they expelled him from the synagogue. This was indeed the experience of many Jews who became Christians. And the experience of many others later on, expelled by their families, relatives and society.

Found by Jesus

Jesus hears that the man has been expelled. He goes in search of him and finds him. *"Do you believe in the Son of Man, that is, the Messiah?"* Jesus asks him. *"Tell me who he is and I will believe in him."* He does not recognise the man Jesus for this is the first time he has seen him with his new vision since his healing. Says Jesus, *"You have seen him. He is talking with you now."* *"I believe, Lord,"* the man replies and falls down on his knees before Jesus. He is now a disciple. A disciple is someone who knows and can see Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. *"I came to this world so that the blind could see and those who see become blind."*

The seeing blind

The Pharisees ask, *"Do you mean we are blind, too?"* *"If you were really blind [like the man],"* Jesus tells them, *"you would not have sin; but because you say, 'We can see', you are guilty."* Jesus turns around their conviction: a blind man is a sinner. Rather, says Jesus, it is those who think they can see when they cannot who are the guilty ones.

There are two kinds of people:

- like the blind man, they accept Jesus' teaching and are the sheep of his flock;
- like the Pharisees, who refuse to believe, they do not belong to Jesus.

(Immediately following this passage, John's gospel will speak about Jesus as the Good Shepherd.)

Those who sin, those who refuse to listen, those who are proud, are the really blind people. The Pharisees, who thought they could see, were the real sinners. And the man born blind who accepts Jesus can really see.

All in need of the Light

On the one hand, like the man in the Gospel who represents all of us, we were also blind and stumbling in darkness. Through Baptism, we live in the light of the Gospel and the New Testament. And that light is seen in the way we behave, in the way we relate with other people in "complete goodness and right living and truth". Our lives are to have a transparency where there is no darkness, no hidden behavior which we would be ashamed to reveal to others.