

Homily for 4th Sunday of Lent on John 9:1-41, The Man Born Blind.

Blind from birth. What would it be like? All your other senses might compensate but still, it is hard to be without one of your senses. Perhaps your imagination had painted a picture of the world around you. Your own version. Although we know people without sight can live perfectly well in the world, yet to suddenly see would be a transforming moment. So many emotions, so many new experiences. How did your old picture match seeing reality?

For John the evangelist, though we would not use this image today, it is a move from darkness to light. Both physically, and more importantly for him, spiritually. It is a healing, a making whole, a restoration of 'shalom,' the peace that means so much more to the Jews, a wholeness.

The presence of Jesus, the encounter with the 'Light of the World' has illuminated the man's soul as well as his eyes.

The early Church undoubtedly saw this as an image of the sacrament of baptism the Church would practice later. (Raymond Brown, the American theologian who spoke to us in Rome loved this side of the story.) The anointing of his eyes, and then the washing in the pool of Siloam, one of the great water sources for Jerusalem, and whose name means 'The One sent.' This is, for John, Jesus. At the end of the gospel the man will say, 'Lord, I believe.' That might have been all you had to say in the very early Church to be baptised. In this way the story prepares us for Easter.

This is one of the great stories of coming to faith, last week's was the woman at the well in Samaria. What might surprise us is that here the man only comes to his declaration of faith sometime after his baptism. Baptism opens the way. But it is only after being verbally attacked and questioned, heavily pressured to reject Jesus, which he resists, the he makes his statement of faith. This might resonate, make sense to us, in our own lives. Think back to your own baptism. If you entered the Church as an adult perhaps faith came to you after being challenged. But for many, we only know of our baptism, if we do, through stories or possibly pictures. We were in no position to say, 'I believe.' Only later after we have lived a while and faced the challenges of the world, could we fully say that we have faith in Jesus, and even now it might feel rocky at times.

John is well aware of our weakness. Look at those who surround the man and his miracle.

First there are those who knew him, his neighbours and people who knew him as a beggar. From the story you can picture their discussion, all arguing, questioning, some open to it, some doubt it is even him, even though only his sight has changed. But they lead to the first statement about

Jesus by the man born blind on his step to faith. “It was the man called Jesus.”

Then we have the Pharisees. These guys are used to learned debate and meaningful interpretation. They are used to giving people the right answers. But their fixation with the proper practice of the Law, the rules, overcomes any openness to miracle, wonder, mystery. However much good Jesus does, “he cannot be from God.” Of course as the reader we know how wrong they were. But do we allow what we know of the world to exclude any divine mystery from our lives? So ‘rational’ that we reject miracle?

But the man here is brought to say, ‘He is a prophet.’ The journey to faith is underway.

Then come the parents. Poor, scared of the Pharisees and bow-beaten by them, their best escape is to sit on the fence. A place we love to be as humans, however uncomfortable it might seem. It is an escape from making a decision. The parents are even brought to disown their own son.

John will not let us sit on the fence when faced with Jesus, when faced with the cross. This comes partly from the reality of the Christian situation in John’s time, when Christians are finally being excluded from synagogues as heretics, the man’s parents were frightened of being shut out, but it is also a lesson for us too. Faith has to be wholehearted.

The greatest point of the story is when the man takes on the Pharisees. Full of ridicule for their hypocritical stance. ‘I don’t know if he is a sinner, I only know that once I was blind and now I can see.’

It is then after his defence of Jesus that he finds him once more. ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ ‘Who is he?’ ‘You are looking at him, he is speaking to you.’ ‘I do believe.’ The man’s final statement of faith.

Most of us sharing this story will have been baptised. Many of us in the coming weeks might feel that a darkness is overshadowing our lives, that of those around us. Not that the coronavirus is in any way sent from God, but that worry and sickness challenges our faith and it is hard to see light at the end of the tunnel. If we hold onto Jesus in all of this, meet the challenge with him, like the man born blind, then I believe it can only reinforce our faith, and like the man born blind, lead us to say, ‘Lord, I believe,’ even more strongly than before. The Light of the World is always ready to make us whole, give us his peace, his Shalom, even in the darkest of times.