

The story of Jesus giving sight to a beggar born blind is another one of the great literary masterpieces of the Gospel of John. It traces the movement toward the light which is the journey of every Christian.

Encountering this blind beggar, the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" What a question to ask! Could they have actually believed that this man had sinned while he was still in the womb? Someone is to blame. There is a lack of vision here. This is how humans often think. We see it every day in the media and in conversations with people. And this is how the Pharisees in today's Gospel also think. But this is not how Jesus thinks.

Jesus lays no blame. He responds with compassion. Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, and said, "Go wash in the pool of Siloam," which the blind man did, and he was able to see.

The Pharisees want to know how he came to see. The beggar told them "the man called Jesus put mud on my eyes. Then I washed and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man cannot be from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath." They said this because Jesus had worked the miracle on the Sabbath. The Pharisees ask, "What do you say about him?" He said, "He is a prophet." He is no longer a man called Jesus. He is a prophet! The Pharisees are shocked and dismayed. They cannot see the wonderful thing that Jesus has done for this man; they can only see that he has broken the Sabbath.

But the man who had been blind is coming to ever greater spiritual vision. Perversely, the Pharisees do everything they can to undermine his testimony. They question whether he was really blind from birth, until it is confirmed by his parents that he was. Then they want to hear him tell them again how Jesus opened his eyes. He says, "I told you already and you would not listen. Do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?" The Pharisees are

angered now. "You are his disciple. We are disciples of Moses, but this man we do not know where he comes from."

This beggar who has been given sight by Jesus is now shocked by the blindness of the Pharisees, for they cannot see what he himself now sees so very clearly. He says, "This is an astonishing thing. You don't know where he comes from, and yet he has opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners.... Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God he could do nothing." Isn't this amazing? The blind beggar has now become a theologian!

"You were born in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" The Pharisees can't take it anymore. They throw him out of the synagogue. The only way they can deal with a suffering world is to see it antagonistically, as a world where some, like themselves, are on the inside and others, like a blind beggar, are on the outside. Jesus holds no such view of the world. When he heard that he had been driven out, Jesus found him. This beggar is given the opportunity to make an explicit act of faith in Jesus and finds himself in a new community. Jesus has come to heal our blindness. He wants us to see that we are all connected to God and one another. "We are all connected in love because we are all rooted and grounded in the creator God who is love" [Father Robert Barron]. He wants us to see that beneath all the divisions that separate us from one another there is this deeper and abiding truth, that in God's eyes we are all beloved children of his.

Jesus is the light of the world. He tells us he has come "so that those who do not see may see." He wants to unite us to himself, so that united to him we can love and see one another with his eyes. For this reason he instructed the blind beggar to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. This is a very deliberative reference to Christian Baptism, which is the Sacrament that unites us to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The smearing with the mud paste evokes the anointing with oil that takes place during the rite. It also calls to mind how as told in the Book of Genesis God had created the first human being from the dust of the earth. In Baptism we all become a new creation in Christ. The baptismal liturgy of the early Church was often called "photismos." This is the Greek word for enlightenment.

To be washed in the waters of baptism is to leave the darkness of sin behind and to move into the light. To be baptized is to be enlightened by Christ who is the light of the world.

The reading from Ephesians today refers precisely to this very understanding of baptism. The text states: "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light..... Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness." The unfruitful works of darkness were what had characterized their earlier lives. Speaking of their former lives before Baptism, the Apostle asks in the Letter to the Romans, "What have you got to show for living such an immoral life?" What has living in sin brought you, except shame, embarrassment, guilt, emptiness and loneliness? Have nothing to do with the unfruitful works of darkness!

The same dark forces that were at work in the ancient world of the early Christians are still at work in the world of today. Living a Christian today is not easy. We always need to make a determined effort not to slide back into sin and a world of darkness. But if we do happen to slip and fall, there is a remedy. We can take advantage of the great mercy of the Lord Jesus and the Sacrament he gave to his Church that restores us to grace and friendship with God. The Christian life is not only about avoiding sin. It is also about growing in vision and holiness. We are called to grow in holiness through reflection upon the Gospels, by learning more about our faith and by living lives of loving service. In this way our vision is enlarged, and like the beggar in today's Gospel we become even stronger witnesses to Christ. If we are to persevere and not lose heart, we will need to pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds and keep us on the path that leads to eternal life. Good friends, let us strive, as the Apostle recommends, to find out what is pleasing to the Lord and do it. Yes, do it! And your light will shine before others.

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