

“Seeing is believing”

John 9:1-41

March 22, 2020

Two weeks ago, I mentioned that John’s gospel is like a totem, a mixture of metaphors – light, bread, life, truth and water . . . and today the passage focusses on the idea of light. We are invited to explore the light image by seeing God as the discerning light which illuminates and reveals, and to know ourselves as light-bearers for the world.

Today’s scripture invites us to see the man, born blind, as the mirror of all we are called to be as Christians. His miracle is our miracle. What makes the story so exciting is that as the man makes each choice, he is seeing himself, revealing God’s image within him. Step by step, the image emerges as the man chooses a new way of being in the world. The purpose of the miracle is not to give him the ability to distinguish red from green, but to give him the ability to distinguish truth from illusion.

The first step this man takes on that new path is obedience. Jesus puts clay on his eyes and sends him to the pool of Siloam (which literally means "sent") to wash. Like most of the word plays in John’s Gospel, this one has many layers: Jesus is sent to be a living incarnation of God’s love, the blind man is sent to Jesus so that God’s works may become visible to the people, the man is sent by Jesus to the pool to complete the healing. In each case, the response to the sending is obedience, because without obedience no transformation (miracle) can happen.

Second, the man born blind steps into a place of personal witness. The religious authorities call the man before them to "throw light" on the events, but when he does so by declaring that Jesus is a prophet, he also throws the entire status quo into turmoil. The establishment does not really want truth; they want affirmation of what they know to be safe and familiar.

The man’s witness and conviction illuminate the conflict lurking among the priests themselves. The man’s certainty causes the leaders to exhibit some anxiety that results in them sending for the man’s parents and his neighbors. They don’t get the answers that they want, which results in the leaders harassing and threatening the man, and eventually leads to them casting him out of the religious community for being whole!

We miss the point if we simply describe the religious authorities as being evil. Everyone is acting from conviction and with good intentions, but there is a critical difference. The man born blind is willing to acknowledge his blindness and, therefore, his need for clear sight; the Pharisees are so sure that their sight is perfect that they become blind to everything but their expectations. The blind man’s transformation comes from his ability to see what actually is, not merely what he wants or expects. He becomes a light-giver himself simply by holding true to the truth he sees. This makes him not only an articulate and authoritative witness, but an accurate witness.

The third step the man born blind chooses is a humility that hides nothing. He stands completely exposed in the glare of public scrutiny. He makes no extravagant claims about his healing and he doesn’t change his testimony in order to please the priests. He does not attribute the miracle to his own righteousness. He does not judge Jesus one way or the other. He speaks the truth and he continues to speak the

truth simply because it is the truth, and thus prevents the Pharisees from rewriting the story to suit themselves.

This is not only humility; it is courage of the highest order. This man has nothing to gain and everything to lose. He cannot expect to be cared for by Jesus if his own community turns against him. He can look for nothing better than to be an outcast, but he does not change his story to suit another narrative.

And his humility enables his inner blossoming. When Jesus next appears, the man born blind is not angry at his treatment; he lays no blame at Jesus' door; he asks no favour. With his world turned upside down, he never loses his spiritual balance, because he is able to perceive himself (and, therefore, others) in proper perspective to God. He recognizes in Jesus the image of God, because he can finally see himself as an image of God.

This story gives us the opportunity to name our own blindness, our own places of being "out of focus." The good news of this story is that the man born blind does not remain blind; we do not need to remain blind, either. Jesus offers the man the chance not only to see the light, but to be light. That promise is for us, as well. We need only give up the illusions of our shadowed world.

The religious leaders represent all those who are not ready to see an unexpected truth.

We have a choice. One path leads to seeing what is in all its untamed excitement; the other shows us only the figments of our own imagination. The choice is not easy, but that does not mean there is not a right choice and a wrong one. For the Christian there is only one option.

The true light that enlightens us has come into the world. He has come to us in our blindness and covered our sightless eyes with clay. If we go to the pool to wash, it is not only so that we can see the light, but so that we can be light in the world. God's clarity will shine through us because there will no longer be anything to disguise it.

Two mirrors, two choices: in one is the image of God, in the other illusion and deceit. This Lent may you see clearly and choose wisely.