

This Sunday's Readings – the 4th Sunday of Lent – Today we celebrate the second of the three “Scrutinies”. The themes of today’s readings are light and darkness, sight and blindness. These themes are also part of the Baptismal Rite. Throughout these readings, remember this well known phrase – “There are none so blind as those who will not see”.

In the first reading from the first Book of Samuel, Samuel is directed by God to select the next king of Israel. He is to choose one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem, who had 8 sons. Of the 7 sons present, God rejected all of them. The youngest son, David, was then summoned from the fields and was selected by God. It is not by physical appearance that God judges but by what is in a person’s heart – “Not as man sees does God see”. God knew that David would be a good king because he looked into David’s heart and “the spirit of the Lord rushed upon David”. He was then anointed with oil (Messiah means anointed one) as the next king of Israel. It really isn’t all that clear how this reading connects with the Gospel reading. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* makes this suggestion – “Could it be that the anointing of David as king (= shepherd in the responsorial psalm) is a type of Christ’s baptism, which is his call to take up his mission as light of the world, and of the baptism of the believer, who there receives the illumination of the Spirit?”. However, Fr. Roger Karban in his 1999 article in *The Evangelist* has a different take on this connection – “The Sacred Writer assures us that David will grow into a good king because "from that day on, the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him." Yahweh not only sees who David is, but also sees who David can become. Belief in an ability to grow into the person God expects us to become also seems to be the reason for a major difference between John's theology and that of the Synoptics. For the latter, Jesus works miracles only for those who have faith in Him before the miracle takes place. For John, faith comes to the recipient after the miracle happens. John's theology is classically presented in the Gospel (Jn 9:1-41). Notice, for instance, that at no point does the blind man ask to be cured. Jesus takes the initiative. First, He makes mud out of His spit, smears it on the beggar's eyes, then tells him to wash it off. Even when he discovers he can see, he doesn't understand the meaning of the event. The blind man's faith develops gradually. When bystanders and the man's neighbors initially ask what happened, he replies, "The man they call Jesus made mud and smeared it on my eyes." Then after the Pharisees demand an explanation and ask his opinion of Jesus, he progresses further in his belief: "He is a prophet." Finally, he meets Jesus eye to eye and professes complete faith in Him as God, even bowing down "to worship Him." An unbelieving blind beggar is chosen by Jesus to evolve into a person of faith”.

The Gospel reading from John is the Story of the Blind Man. Did this account of the curing of a blind man really happen during Jesus’ ministry? Reginald H. Fuller explains – “The original story in today's gospel must have simply told how a man was born blind and was healed by Jesus. This was later expanded by a trial scene, in which the man was charged with having become an adherent of Jesus. This stage of development reflects the expulsion of Jewish converts to Christianity from the synagogue. The evangelist then added the Christological elements, such as verses 4-5, which declare Jesus to be the light of the world, and the discussion about his origins (vv. 29-34). Thus, the healing of the blind man is, for the evangelist, a Christological sign—it shows that Christ is the light

that has come into the darkness of the world. In other words, he is the revelation of God". Remember that the Hebrews believed that a man born with any physical impairment was either a sinner or paying for the sins of his father. Jesus makes a mud paste, spreads the paste on the blind man's eyes. What Jesus did was, according to Jewish tradition, work, which was a violation of the Sabbath Law. He then tells him to wash in the pool of Siloam (meaning "one who is sent"). Note: In 2005, archaeologists found the Pool of Siloam exactly where John said it was located. He washes in the pool of Siloam and his sight is restored. In the Old Testament, there is only one instance of a cure for blindness and that is in the Book of Tobit (11:7-13). However, Tobit was not born blind as the man in this reading. Here, as in last week's reading, water symbolizes baptism, rebirth. Through the waters of baptism, we become the light of the world. Jesus performs this miracle on the Sabbath, where any work, however miniscule, is forbidden. The Pharisees, true to form, try to depict Jesus as a sinner because He does not keep the Sabbath, but even they are divided as to Jesus' true identity. The blind man remains true to Jesus by telling the Pharisees that only a man of God could have cured him. At the end he becomes a follower of Jesus. The Pharisees never do see the Light (Jesus the Messiah), because they believed in the strict interpretation of the Law and not the spirit of the Law. Were they afraid to open their hearts and see the Light? To quote the late Bishop Ken Untener – "Our entire life is meant to be a process of opening our eyes, widening our vision. We are called to imitate the blind man, and not the Pharisees".

Do we really understand the culture of the Mediterranean people both in Jesus' time and today? I found the following commentary from John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* very interesting – "Secrecy, deception, and lying are integral parts of Mediterranean culture and valued strategies for maintaining and preserving honor. Westerners are often baffled by this. Recall the shock one year after the end of the Gulf War when Americans learned that the young girl who testified to a congressional committee that Iraqi soldiers took Kuwaiti babies out of incubators and threw them on the floor to die had deceived the committee. She hid her al-Sabbah (the ruling family of Kuwait) identity from committee members and completely fabricated this report. It never happened. Today's gospel reading about healed blindness reveals glimpses of secrecy, deception, and lying in Mediterranean culture.

BLINDNESS

While the ancient world certainly knew blindness as a real physical condition, they seemed to consider it no worse than ignorance or a stubborn refusal to understand. Luke writes of Jesus: "on *many* that were blind he bestowed sight" (7:21) but he reports only one specific healing of a physically blind person (18:35-43)! On the other hand, Luke-Acts reports many instances of people who refused to "see or understand" and people who chose to "see or understand" There thus seems to be greater interest in metaphorical than physical blindness. In John's report of the man who was blind from birth, both motifs are played out strongly. It is futile to argue about the man's physical condition. He and his parents said he had been physically blind; others doubted or denied it. But the controversy stirred by the man's cure ranges beyond physical blindness to deception and lying. Here is a fruitful area for reflection.

THE HEALED BLIND MAN

After the healing, there is confusion about the man's identity. "It is he," said some, while others countered: "No, but it is someone like him." And the healed man kept insisting: "I am the man!" (vs. 9). In a world without photo IDs and social security numbers, proving personal identity is a real challenge. The Pharisees also seem to accept the healing as a fact (v. 15) but are divided about Jesus' identity: is he a man "from God" or not (v. 16)? Some hostile Judeans doubt that the healed man ever was blind at all (v. 18)! His parents confirm their son's congenital blindness but evade the hostile questions about the healing. "Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself." Hostility and enmity toward Jesus are certainly part of this story. At the same time, there are sincere people really struggling to "see" and "understand" what has happened or who Jesus really is. The prevalence of secrecy, deception, and lying in this culture explains skepticism as a natural part of day-to-day life, and even make hostility and enmity understandable if not excusable. The concluding verses (39-41) illustrate how masterfully Jesus worked within his culture. When needed, he used his powers to heal. In the debates that followed, he drew on his cultured strengths and weaknesses. The fluctuation between physical and metaphorical blindness is common in the gospel traditions. Jesus' point here, as always, is that physical blindness would be understandable and preferable to the willful metaphorical blindness of those who refuse to believe in him. The contemporary popular song captures the idea very well: "There are none so blind, as those who will not see."

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