

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

For the third Sunday in a row, our assigned Gospel reading features a rather long account of a person who is completely changed by their meeting with Jesus. First, there was the Pharisee named Nicodemus. Then there was the Samaritan woman at the well. And now, there is the man born blind, the story told in John 9:1-41. This man is transformed from being a humble blind beggar, into a fearless evangelist. How? By his encounter with Jesus. By his coming to see the one thing that Jesus wants, for all of us, that is, to see.

Today’s gospel story begins with Jesus in Jerusalem – he’d gone there for the Feast of Tabernacles. In that festival, large candelabra were lit in the temple courts, high on the temple mount, which symbolized “the revelation and truth of the Jewish faith.” There Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world, which he claims again in today’s Gospel reading.

Also, at the festival, priests poured water from the Pool of Siloam onto the temple steps “so that it would flow down and out, through the Temple, to the world outside, to show how the Jewish faith would satisfy the world.” The Pool of Siloam is the place where Jesus will put mud on the eyes of the blind man and tell him to wash it away. Clearly, we are to see the connection between the Feast, with its lights, Jesus as the Light of the World, and the blind man seeing.

Next, the encounter with the blind man. Jesus’ disciples do not suggest that he heals the man – but instead they ask, ‘who sinned,’ the man or his parents? Jesus replies that he was blind not because anyone had sinned, but so that God’s work might be revealed in him. Jesus had not yet talked to the man and didn’t ask him if he wanted to be healed, but he just goes ahead. This was an opportunity for Jesus to reveal God’s works. Then Jesus tells the man ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.’ One of the great things about this story is that initially, the blind man didn’t know who Jesus was. It was only after a cross-examination by the Pharisees, then by Jesus’ conversation with him, after the Pharisees had driven him of the temple, did he come to believe.

Jesus asks the man, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answers, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus says to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." The man replies, "Lord, I believe." Then Jesus explains, "I came into this world for judgement, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see, may become blind."

How are we to interpret this Gospel reading? Healing works such as this would be called ‘miracles’ in the synoptic gospels (that is Matthew, Mark and Luke). In John’s gospel, these events are referred to as the ‘signs’ that Jesus gives. Signs point to something. In John’s gospel it is explained that the ‘signs’ are the ‘works’ that Jesus willingly performs so that people will believe in him. Signs that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Pharisees were divided about this proof of the power of Jesus, and they tried to make sense of it. They were the keepers of the Law of Moses. One such law, was that God had commanded that all people keep the Sabbath. This man, Jesus, was a sinner in the eyes of most Pharisees, because he had violated that law first by healing, and then by mixing spittle with mud. Both expressly forbidden on the Sabbath. “Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"”

However, some Pharisees did eventually have second thoughts about what the healing meant. Overhearing Jesus' talk with the man later, they said, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" What irony – the blind man sees but they don't.

Jesus does not rob the Pharisees of their sight, but they are blinded by their refusal to see. The Pharisees, protest at Jesus, “Are we also blind?” They are blind in that they refuse to see. Jesus tells them that they would be better off blind, because then they would not be accountable for their sin. “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore, your sin remains.” They portrayed the blind man as a sinner, their evidence being, his affliction. Now Jesus portrays them as sinners, the evidence being their refusal to see Jesus, the light of the world.

In their pride, they assume that they see clearly and reject anything not in keeping with their beliefs. Jesus does not condemn them, but they are condemned already, because they have not believed in the Son of God.

In their favour, the Pharisees did wrestle with their dilemma, created by the Sabbath healing. They tried to hold both the Law of Moses, together with the signs performed by the law breaker, Jesus, who did seem to be from God. The challenge for them, as with us, was to maintain their humility, to recognize that God may act differently from what most expect.

So, what about us, in this time, now? What does Jesus want us to see and to believe? What do we need to remember this day? Where do we need to work for change in our world? What is God's grace doing in our lives right now? Asking these questions takes us into the heart of today's Gospel reading. An encounter with Jesus that helps this man to see who he is, and who Jesus is. A man born blind, a beggar, who is now a fearless evangelist and a model for us all. He now sees who he is, he sees who Jesus is, and he is helping those around him to see with new eyes.

When Martin Luther died, there was found a scrap of paper in this pocket on which he had simply written: “*We are beggars, this is true.*” After all that Martin Luther had taught and done throughout his life, this was the truth that he held to, as he lay dying. We are beggars, this is true. We are all beggars. We are all blind. We are all sinners. This is true.

And we are all loved. We are all forgiven. We are all redeemed. This is also true. And we are reminded today that if there is one thing we know, it is that though we once were blind, now we see.

In the words of the hymn, we just sang:

‘Praise the one who breaks the darkness
with a liberating light.
Praise the one who frees the prisoners,
turning blindness into sight.’

What a gift we have been given in Jesus, the one who breaks our darkness, and changes it into sight. May we see ourselves through the grace-filled eyes of Jesus. And may we help others to see themselves through those same loving eyes.

Thanks be to God. AMEN