

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

John 9:1-41 in its biblical context

Today we read the story of a man who is given two kinds of sight, physical sight and spiritual sight. As John writes his Gospel at the end of the first century, he wants to help some of his contemporaries gain spiritual insight too. They have been expecting the return of the risen Christ on the clouds of heaven. John wants them to see that the risen Christ is in their midst.

When an author wants his audience to see more than one level of meaning in his writing, the author has to say something in the text that invites the audience to look beyond the surface meaning. We noted this in the commentary on last week's reading when we said that Jesus is in conversation with people who misunderstand what he is saying because they are thinking too literally. Their misunderstanding gives Jesus an opportunity to explain his real meaning. At the same time it gives the author the opportunity to help his audience learn to think allegorically. The mistake that Jesus is correcting in the mind of his listener the author is correcting in the mind of his reader.

John uses a different technique in today's Gospel to invite people to see two levels of meaning in his stories. Notice that when the parents of the blind man are asked how their son can now see they say, "We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself."

Then John explains why the parents answered as they did: "His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Christ, he would be expelled from the synagogue." At the time that Jesus was working mighty signs as part of his public ministry, the Jews were not expelling other Jews from the synagogue because they were followers of Jesus. However, by the time John was writing, this is exactly what was happening. Those Jews who were expelled were put in terrible jeopardy because they were no longer exempt from emperor worship. It would have been a big temptation to refrain from acknowledging Jesus' divinity simply to avoid persecution and possible martyrdom.

By including a plot element that was contemporary with John and his audience rather than with Jesus and his contemporaries, John is inviting his readers to see an additional setting for his Gospel. They are invited to think of John's Gospel as being just as much about the risen Christ in their lives as it is about Jesus during his public ministry.

Notice how John pictures the blind man gradually coming to a full understanding of Jesus' identity. At first, when pressed by the Pharisees to say something about the man who gave him sight, he says only, "He is a prophet." Later, the Pharisees come to the healed man again and say that they know Jesus is a sinner. They have come to this conclusion because Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath. The once blind man insists that Jesus must be from God: "If this man were not

from God, he would not be able to do anything." Of course, those who are reading John's Gospel see a double meaning in the words *from God*, a meaning that the blind man himself does not yet see. John has told us since the very beginning of his Gospel that Jesus is the preexistent Word who came from God.

The Pharisees are disgusted with this answer. They say, "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" The Pharisees believe the man was born totally in sin because he was born blind. They think that suffering is punishment for sin. If a man is born blind it must be because he or his parents sinned. As today's story begins, the disciples express this same belief when they say, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus rejects this belief and says that the blindness is not a punishment for sin at all.

Jesus hears that the Pharisees have thrown the man born blind out. Jesus finds the man and asks him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Remember that the phrase *Son of Man* is an allusion to the figure in the Book of Daniel who will come on the clouds of heaven to judge the nations (Dan 7:13). The man responds, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" When Jesus says, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he," the man says, "I do believe, Lord," and he worships him. The man born blind sees Jesus' divinity.

The man has moved from understanding that Jesus is "a prophet," to understanding that he must be from God, to understanding that he is the Son of Man who was expected to come on the clouds of heaven. John wants his audience to be like the once blind man. He wants them to move to a belief that Jesus is divine and already present to them: "You have seen him." He wants them to be able to *see* that the risen Christ is in their midst.

Notice that when Jesus is healing the blind man of his physical blindness, after smearing clay on his eyes, he sends him to wash in the Pool of Siloam, "which means Sent." If you are thinking allegorically, as John wants you to, you will see a reference to baptism in these words. To be washed is to be baptized. When one is baptized one is sent on mission.

Notice too that just as John gives us a picture of a man learning to see, that is, coming to full faith in Christ, he also gives us a picture of the Pharisees choosing to remain blind. First, because of their legalistic understanding of Sabbath observance, they conclude that Jesus can't be from God. Next, because of their misunderstanding about the role of suffering, they reject not only the testimony of the man born blind, but the man himself. Finally, when they hear Jesus say, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind," they also reject an invitation to personal insight and conversion. They say, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" Jesus tells them that the attitude that has been behind all of their misjudgments, the attitude that they already

know everything and so have nothing to learn, has resulted in their remaining in sin: "... but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains."

The Gospel invites us to be like the man born blind, who grows in his spiritual insight, rather than to be like the Pharisees, who refuse to grow. Will we accept the invitation?

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a in its biblical context

Our reading from the First Book of Samuel is also about *seeing*. The setting for today's story is during the time when the future King David is still a youth tending his father's sheep. Samuel is a prophet of the Lord, and so he speaks for God. God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, because, God says, "I have chosen my king from among his sons" (v. 1c).

As Samuel looks at Jesse's sons, he sees one who is particularly impressive, Eliab. However, the Lord says to Samuel, "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him. Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart."

Samuel listens to the Lord and asks Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" Only then is David brought in from the fields. Samuel "anointed David in the presence of his brothers" (v. 13b). This means that David is a *messiah*, an anointed one. God has a special job for David.

During Lent, as we all examine our consciences and as catechumens prepare for baptism, this reading reminds us that we must try to see, not as human beings see, but as God sees. We are also invited to consider the fact that at baptism we are all anointed with oil as a sign that God has a special mission for each of us too.

Ephesians 5:8-14 in its biblical context

The author of Ephesians invites his readers to "live as children of light." To live as children of light is to "learn what is pleasing to the Lord." The author reminds the Ephesians of a Christian hymn, probably used to celebrate baptism, when he says, "Therefore, it says:

'Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.'

Notice that the Ephesians are not only urged to live as children of light, but are told that they are "light in the Lord." The light that they are will produce every kind of goodness, righteousness, and truth.

This week's Lectionary readings invite us to come into the light that is Christ, to walk in that light by doing God's will, and to realize that as baptized people we have been chosen and sent on mission to be that light for others.

Questions for Breaking Open the Word groups are on page 12.

Questions for preparing this week's Scrutiny

1. In what ways have you, like the man born blind, failed to see?
2. In what ways have you, like the Pharisees, been resistant to letting go of past misunderstandings so that you can grow in your knowledge of the truth?
3. What can you do this week to prepare for your baptism?

Questions for other faith sharing groups

1. Have you ever felt hesitant to profess your beliefs because of the reaction you think you would receive from others? Explain.
2. Have you had to discard some of what you were taught as a child in order to grow spiritually? Explain.
3. Are you baptized? If so, do you think of yourself as chosen by God and as sent on mission? Explain.

Bible study questions

1. In what two ways does John invite his readers to think allegorically as they read his Gospel?
2. What steps does the man born blind go through as he recognizes Jesus' identity?
3. Why do the Pharisees think Jesus cannot be from God?
4. Why does Jesus accuse the Pharisees of remaining in their sin?
5. How does the author of the letter to the Ephesians encourage them to live?

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

John 11:1-45 in its biblical context

In our commentaries on the Gospel readings for the last two Sundays we pointed out the literary devices that John uses to alert his audience to the fact that his story has more than one level of meaning. That knowledge will be very helpful in understanding the full message of the story of the raising of Lazarus. As we will see, this story is about more than the raising of Mary and Martha's brother to an extended life on earth. It is about the raising of John's audience, including us, to eternal life.

John makes it clear that to understand his story we must learn to think allegorically by once again having Jesus engage in a conversation in which words that are intended to be metaphorical are understood to be literal. Jesus tells his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." So the disciples said to him, 'Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved.' But Jesus was talking about