

Lent 4
Cycle A
3.30.25

On the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent, the Elect (those who at the Easter Vigil will be baptized and receive the sacraments of Confirmation and the Eucharist) go through a ritual called a Scrutiny. A Scrutiny is nothing more than an opportunity for the Elect to look deeply into their hearts and see what needs to be changed, what needs to become more Christ-like in their lives. By the way, the process of “scrutinizing” our lives is something that all Catholics do throughout the season of Lent. Lent is a time for repenting, that is turning back (the literal meaning of “repent”) to the ways of Christ and turning away from sin.

To help the Elect, the Church offers special readings during these three Sundays. On this Fourth Sunday of Lent, the Church has us reflect on the story from John’s gospel about the man born blind. (This gospel is different from the gospel found in the C cycle of readings used at all the other Masses this weekend.) The story of the man born blind is more than a miracle story of a man recovering his sight. It is primarily about focusing on the person of Christ and how that act helps us to live a better and more authentic life.

Several weeks ago, I heard a story about a young man who started going blind when he was 18 years old. He went completely blind ten years later. He related an experience he had when he traveled out of town on business. When he got to his hotel room, he surveyed the room like he normally does. By touching the walls and the furniture, he’s able to map out the room in his head and can then figure out how to get around the room without bumping into things. When he touched a nightstand, he assumed he’d find a phone. He was hoping to call his wife and let her know that he got to his destination safely. To his surprise he didn’t find or feel a phone. He went to the other nightstand. No phone. Then he felt along the coffee table. No phone. Frustrated, he went to bed.

The next day, he was startled to hear a phone ringing in his room. He thought he had examined the room closely and had never discovered a phone. He was certainly surprised to hear it ringing. It was on a table by a wall that didn’t seem to be there the night before. He felt his way to the phone and picked it up. It was his wife. She was worried that he didn’t call her the night before. He said he couldn’t find the phone and was wondering how everything got switched around the room since he entered it last evening.

The young man related that his wife was used to hearing stories like this. As he recalled the previous evening, he remembered that he only felt along three walls. He missed the fourth wall as well as the little alcove where the phone was located. He shared the following comments with his interviewer, “not being able to see isn’t the problem. I’ve learned to cope with blindness in a number of ways. What’s most difficult is the embarrassment and even shame I experience when I go through episodes like this. It makes me feel less than; it makes me feel incompetent.” Then he added with a chuckle, “It’s not how I want people to see me.”

I thought the man's remarks were telling. "It's not the blindness that's the problem. It's the embarrassment and shame that I feel."

If you break down the gospel story of the man born blind, you'll count five different episodes where those around this man heaped embarrassment, shame, and even ridicule upon him. The disciples of Jesus are the first to do so. They simply reflected a common religious philosophy of the day which held that someone is physically ill or in dire poverty because they had sinned and God was punishing them because of that sin. Jesus addresses that distorted theology. And he restores the very dignity of the blind man by saying that God will work THROUGH him. That must have been an eye-opener to the disciples' pre-conceived religious notions.

Second, the neighbors of the blind man weigh in. When they encounter this man who can see, they assume it can't be the blind man. Maybe they knew his background and presumed God would never heal a sinner like him. So they are blind to the miracle that happened. And they are blind to work that God can do in any person – despite what WE might think of them or even despite what they may have done.

Third, the Pharisees take on the blind man. It is amazing that they chastise him for having been healed on the Sabbath. I guess we are to conclude from their irrational reasoning that the blind man should have waited to be healed on Tuesday or Thursday. Because the Pharisees cannot see the new life that Jesus offers, they remain stuck in their old ways, which leaves them bitter and angry. It is more than ironic that the blind man is the one who really "sees," and it is the Pharisees who see visually but are blind and willfully ignorant to the abundant life which Christ offers.

Fourth, and perhaps most surprising, the parents of the blind man fail to see or accept what happened with their son. Out of fear, they don't align themselves with the miracle that Christ worked. Rather, they leave their son to his defend himself and fail to support him. How often do we fail to act or align with Christ because we are afraid of what others might say, think, or possibly do to us? This failure based on fear seems to be one of the greatest sins in our current day.

Finally, the Pharisees appear on the scene again. They are so enraged by this whole episode and so misunderstand what it is that Christ offers that they literally throw the blind man out of the synagogue.

All of these episodes remind us that our encounters with Christ are life-altering and sometimes a threat to others. Through it all, Christ asks us to remain faithful to him. And he promises to sustain us even when we seem off balance, even when others question us or ridicule us or demean us because of our faithful response.

This is exactly what happened to the blind man. And it is exactly the same gift Christ offers to us as we believe in him and give our wills over to him. At the end of the gospel, the man now healed of his blindness encounters Christ. This is the exchange they had:

***When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out,
he found him and said, Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
He answered and said,
"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"
Jesus said to him,
"You have seen him,
the one speaking with you is he."
He said,
"I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.
Then Jesus said,
"I came into this world for judgment,
so that those who do not see might see,
and those who do see might become blind."***

Jesus made the blind man see. More importantly, Jesus helped the man to see who Christ is. He helped him to see that even in blindness, Christ leads us to something more than human, ocular vision. He ultimately freed the man from shame and guilt. And he enabled him to remain strong and proclaim the Good News even when threatened or mistreated.

That is what Jesus offers. To the Elect. To us. And to everyone who simply and faithfully professes that they believe him. When we do so, we are able to see, to really see, who Christ is and what Christ is able to do for us and in us.

Amen? Amen!