

Articles and Sermons :: The healing of the man born blind by Thomas Ridenour

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Christ is Risen!

On this Sixth Sunday of Pascha the Church commemorates the healing of the man born blind as recorded in John, chapter 9. There are accounts of others in the New Testament whom Jesus healed of blindness, but according to ancient tradition, this was different. This man--whose name was Celidonius-- was not merely blind, he had no eyes at all--just hollow sockets! Jesus filled those empty sockets with clay and told Celidonius to wash in the pool of Siloam where the clay was miraculously transformed into brand new eyes! By this creative miracle, Jesus demonstrated that he was everything he claimed to be-- the Son of God-- the very Creator who fashioned Adam from the dust of the earth in the beginning.

The Pool of Siloam, fed by the Spring of Gihon, was the first stop for pilgrims visiting the Temple in Jerusalem, where they purified themselves before entering. Hence, it was a figure of the baptismal font wherein sinners are washed before entering the Church.

All of us are born spiritually blind. It is our inheritance from Adam. So the blind man's story is the story of each of us who have been washed in the font of Holy Baptism and come away seeing. It is not the water in and of itself, but the water sanctified by the Spirit which effects this miracle and opens our inner eyes to the mysteries of the kingdom of God. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot SEE the kingdom of God.

In the hymns for this Sunday, the Church puts words in the mouth of the man born blind-- or more precisely, in his heart and mind-- such as the following:

“In his mind the man born blind said: * ‘Can I have been born blind because of the sins of my parents? * Or have I been born blind as a reproach to the unbelief of the gentiles? * I cannot tell when I should ask: Is it day, is it night? * I can no longer bear to stumble over stones, * for I have not beheld the sun shining, * nor Him Who created me in His image. * Yet do I beseech Thee, O Christ God: * Look down upon me and have mercy on me!’”

And likewise:

“Passing by, the Master and Creator of all came upon a blind man sitting by the way, who wept and said: ‘I have never in my life beheld the sun shining or the light of the radiant moon. Wherefore I cry unto Thee: O Thou Who wast born of the Virgin and enlightenest all things, enlighten me, in that Thou art compassionate, that falling down before Thee, O Master Christ my God, I may cry out: Grant me remission of my transgressions in the multitude of Thy mercy toward us, O Thou Who lovest mankind.’”

These words are not recorded in Scripture, but they are “Scriptural” nonetheless. They convey the spirit of what took place, not merely the letter, giving us insight into what moved Jesus to heal this young man. For he knew the thoughts of his heart. He heard his unspoken, unutterable prayer. And the Gospel of John itself is like that. It is unique among the Four Gospels in that it is not so much an historical record of the life of Christ, but a theological commentary by the Spirit himself, who plumbs the unsearchable depths of the heart and mind of Christ and reveals it unto us.

And the Church in her hymns places words in our mouths as well, anticipating and synergizing with the work of the Spirit which he seeks to accomplish in us this day:

“Enlighten, O Lord, my noetic eyes * which have been blinded by dark sin, * instilling humility, * O Compassionate One; * and wash me * with tears of repentance”.

And again:

“Blinded in the eyes of my soul, I draw nigh unto Thee, O Christ, like the man blind from his birth, and in repentance I cry to Thee: Thou art the exceeding radiant Light of those in darkness.”

And further:

“Since my soul’s noetic eyes * are blind and sightless, * I come unto Thee, O Christ, * as did the man who was born blind. * And in repentance I cry to Thee: * Of those in darkness art Thou the most radiant Light.”

May the Lord indeed grant that we may be illumined by his most radiant light as we contemplate this great sign wrought

by the Son of God upon the man born blind.

John Chapter 9 is a continuation of John 8, where Jesus disputed with the Jews in the Temple, where he declared that he is the Light of the World, and where he exhorted those Jews who believed on him to continue in his word that they may be disciples indeed. For thus they would know the truth, and the truth would set them free. But that ticked them off: "We are Abraham's seed, we were never in bondage to anyone," they retorted. But Jesus went straight to the heart of the matter:

"Whoever practices sin is the slave of sin." The exchange continued back and forth until, incredibly, even those Jews who believed in him took up stones to stone him! And so, Jesus withdrew from them and passed on his way through their midst, for his hour had not yet come.

Chapter 9, then, takes up where Chapter 8 left off: "And as he passed by he saw a man which was blind from his birth." Last week we saw how Providence arranged the circumstances to facilitate the meeting of Jesus with the woman at the well. Now the same Providence so orders it that Jesus should encounter this young man sitting by the wayside near the gate of the Temple. And this Providence ever attended Jesus because his desire was always to do the will of his Father in heaven. That should encourage us, that as long as we seek to do God's will, he will direct our paths and bring us through every danger, toil, and snare.

Doing the will of God is not a mechanical process of observing a list of do's and don'ts; but, once we offer up our own will to God, the Holy Spirit, as the prophets foretold, writes his laws upon the table of our hearts and causes us to walk in his ways. As St Symeon the New Theologian explains, this is accomplished imperceptibly:

"If a man cuts off his own will through fear of God, then, without his being aware of it or knowing how it happens, God grants him His will and ineliminably plants it in that man's heart, at the same time opening the eyes of his heart so that he can know it (that is know that it is God's will), and gives him the power to fulfil it. This is done by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and without it nothing is done."

Now when the disciples saw the man born blind they were tempted, like we often are, to try to make sense of it according to their limited human understanding: "Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This evinces a certain measure of pride, for as St. Macarius of Optina tells us:

"The humble do not investigate the depth of the unknown, but they humble their thinking, and in time God enlightens the mind."

But Jesus does respond that this defect of nature had nothing to do with anybody's sin, but in order that the works of God might be made manifest in him. And so it is with us. It is enough when we see the evil and injustice in and around us to know that we live in a fallen world where suffering and death prevail, but we trust that God shall have the final say, and that every wrong shall be made right in his good time, if not in this world, then in the next. That is the Christian's blessed hope!

Verse 4: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work." There are times and seasons in our lives, as the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes: a time to be born, a time to die, etc. We must work while it is day. While there remains the opportunity to do good, we must seize it. We never know when the night of sickness or death will befall us when we can no longer do the works of God.

Verses 6 and 7 "...he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" This illustrates how God uses lifeless matter as a vehicle to impart his grace to mankind. It is the basis of the Sacraments.

Water is lifeless matter, but when the Spirit moves upon it, the baptismal font is transformed into a regenerating bath. Oil is lifeless matter, but by the action of the Holy Spirit it seals the newly baptized in the sacrament of Chrismation. Bread and wine are lifeless matter, but when the Holy Spirit comes down upon them at the epiclesis, they become the very Body and Blood of Christ.

The Bible is lifeless paper and ink, but when the Spirit speaks through it, its words become alive and powerful. Icons are lifeless wood and paint, but when the Spirit acts upon them they become windows to heaven, conveying God's light and grace. Incense is lifeless fragrance, but when the Spirit acts through it, it becomes the sweet savor of Christ.

"Go, wash in the pool of Siloam".

What an incredible effort this would have required of a man with no eyes! He would have to feel his way to the healing well.

aters, grasping for something familiar, reaching out with his hands to touch the walls in order to get his bearings. Or perhaps he would have to beg the help of some kind person on the street to lead him by the hand.

Likewise, seeking God requires effort on our part. Acts 17:27 tells us that we "should seek the Lord, if haply we might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being...." God is everywhere present and fills all things, but our sins have hid his face from us. To make matters worse, the god of this world (Satan) hath blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ should shine unto them.

Nevertheless, the Lord has promised that he will be found of us if we seek him with all our hearts. As the Psalmist prays, "When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek." Where there is a will, God will make a way! But we must be willing to pay the price. Like the man born blind, we must leave behind what is familiar and feel our way through the dark corridors of our inner landscape until we come to the still waters of Siloam where our eyes are opened to behold the glory of God. As the apostle writes:

"He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.

When, like the man born blind, we come to the still waters of Siloam and there wash the earth from our eyes, we come again seeing. We begin to discern and differentiate between light and darkness, between good and evil. And as we go our way, the whole world becomes radiant with the glory of God, as the prophet foretold: "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."