

The Man Born Blind and the Journey to Baptism

We sit in a three-year cycle of readings. Every year over a three-year period, we have different readings for those three years, and then we repeat the same readings. However, the Church says that when candidates and catechumens are coming into the Church—especially at this Mass, the Mass of the Scrutiny—this reading is always read on this Sunday, no matter what year of the cycle we're in. So we actually end up skipping the other two cycles when there are baptisms.

The reason the Church does that is that these readings on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays of Lent are very significant regarding the journey of those who are coming into the Church, especially for our catechumens, which is the group that will be baptized at the Easter Vigil in three weeks.

I want to explain what the Church sees within these readings, because it talks about the journey of conversion. All of Lent is about conversion for all of us. It also depicts for us different attitudes we can have that are more or less adequate to continuing to be illuminated by Christ, seeing the world more as He sees it, and growing closer in union with Him.

So, to begin, a question: why is it in this reading today that Jesus does not heal simply through a word? Almost all the other healings He does throughout Scripture, He simply lays hands or speaks a word, and the person is healed.

Let me explain the symbols here. The man born blind, although this is almost certainly a historical healing that happened, nonetheless is cast by John in a vision that very much gets at conversion. The man born blind is you before you were baptized. The man born blind is one who is completely crippled by original sin and is unable to see the world as a beloved child of God in the light of faith. So the man born blind is all of us.

The reason Jesus doesn't cure simply through a word is that there's a process here. The initial process of Jesus spitting on the ground and making clay with His saliva is an image that goes back to Genesis chapter 2. Genesis chapter 2 is the second creation story. In this, there is a wellspring coming out of the ground, watering all the dirt of the earth there in the garden of Eden. The Lord God takes the clay and makes Adam out of the clay. So Jesus is, in a sense, making a recreation. In doing that and applying it to the blind man's eyes, we have this concept of an initial contact with Christ.

Think of an adult who's never been baptized and did not grow up believing in God, and nonetheless encounters God in some way, in some circumstance, and begins seeking God in His presence. That is, in fact, the journey of a catechumen—an adult coming into the

Church—at some point having contact with God and then beginning to do something about it: the initial contact with Him.

Jesus then commands the man born blind to do something: to go to Siloam and wash. This calls forth the obedience that is needed for a catechumen to sense this initial contact with God, with the Gospel, with Christ Himself, with the Holy Spirit—however they might define it—and then in obedience begin seeking the path. In a sense, it is more or less entering the OCIA process.

We can have contact with God and not be obedient to what He's asking us. We can sense God's presence through our conscience, through whatever experience of the Gospel, and choose not to be obedient to the call and not to begin to seek the path. Those who have progressed in OCIA to this point, though, have been obedient to the call and are following what the Lord is asking of them, which leads to the washing, which we call Baptism, at the Easter Vigil in a few weeks.

The man then washing in the pool and gaining his sight represents the fact that Baptism gives us the ability to see and the capacity to see. And note I said capacity. We have capacities for all sorts of things that we never actualize. But Baptism makes us beloved children of God, brings us into a relationship with the Trinity, and bestows the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit upon us, which remain capacities for living in union, by our choice, with the Lord. That will be created for them in a new way when they are baptized at the Easter Vigil. That capacity also is created in us.

The Progression of Faith

Even with that, there is further progress that's needed. The Christian life—and this entire year we've been focusing on the universal call to holiness—means that we are called to be great saints in this life, and are capable of that by God's grace.

So we see the progression with the man born blind. He sees now, but it's kind of a struggle for him to get to the point of worshiping the Lord. First, as he is questioned, he calls Jesus a man. As he further grapples with the Pharisees' opposition, he progresses to calling Him a prophet. As they continue to be contentious with him, he progresses to calling Him one sent from God. And then finally, at the end of the reading today, we hear that he worships Him.

Worship is due only to God. He calls Him Lord.

Now, that progression is not just for the catechumens. For those of us who have already been baptized, we have these capacities. But these capacities need to be awakened by our worship of God, by our ordering our lives around what the Lord teaches us, by our worship

at this altar, by our prayer and devotion, by our sacrifices that we call sacrifices of praise. All of that enlivens the faith and keeps it moving.

So that is the symbolism in today's Gospel.

Three Hearts to Examine

Now, reflection. St. Augustine, in looking at this reading, identifies three different groups of people for those of us who are baptized to consider in today's reading.

The first group of people are grumpy: the Pharisees. This guy just had his sight restored. They should be like, "Wow, this is amazing," and instead they're nitpicking.

The Pharisees represent religion without humility—and let's just say people without humility. What part of my heart is closed to the grace of God? What part of my heart is blind and not able to see, and not even willing to consider change?

I'll say that again. The Pharisees represent the part of my heart that is unwilling to change, the part of my heart that is unwilling to be open to grace, and the part of my heart that is lacking in humility—more or less, the part of my heart that thinks I already have it figured out. Dangerous spiritual territory, my friends. And I'm not claiming to be exempt from this myself.

The second group of people we should examine are his parents. Augustine says his parents represent people who believe, but are very passive, on the fence, and unwilling to step out. They're diverting the question to their son. This is someone who believes but is unwilling to actually step out if there's any cost in it.

What part of my heart is that way? The part of my heart that believes, and maybe has humility and openness to God's grace, but is unwilling to take the cost needed to step into what I'm being called into.

The third group, or person, is the man born blind himself. That is the part of my heart that is open to conversion. It's the part of my heart that is open to be enlightened by Christ and to follow wherever He leads, no matter what the cost is.

Dear friends, let us examine our hearts over these last three weeks of Lent. Let us strive, like the man born blind, to step out where needed, to encounter Christ who will enlighten us and who will bring us to happiness, so that as we celebrate the Easter mysteries, we may experience that newness of life He desires for each and every one of us. Praise be Jesus Christ.