

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

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## At First Sight

We can't read today's Gospel properly until we register the full import of the words "*born blind*". I'm quite sure that the phrase is there for two reasons: firstly, to emphasise the *totality of the disability*: he is not suffering from myopia or cataracts or any developing condition, but from a total absence of sight; secondly, to call us to meditate on the condition of *never having seen the light of day*.

### Use Your Imagination

Most of us tried in our childhood to imagine blindness; what we *can't* imagine is *never having seen*. Even if you have only had a fraction of your eyesight, you can't imagine the total absence of the dimension of light. And yet life is lived by some who have never known anything but darkness. I am sure that the Gospel wants us to struggle to imagine this state. Think of a world you can relate to only by hearing, smell, taste, and touch; think of the deprivation of all that you receive through your eyes. You would not entirely miss a flower, if you could smell it, and feel its delicacy and intricacy and structure; but how would anyone teach you about a field ablaze with poppies, or an orchard explosive with spring blossom, or the joy of a fragrant garden in the evening sun? A totally blind man can be taken to the seaside or up a mountain, and can hear the vastness of the air and the force of the wind; but who would tell him about the colours of the changing sky, and its capacity to "*declare the glory of God*" with colours, cloud forms, gradations of light? The most precious of sights, that of a beloved human face, can scarcely be imagined: the way in which we can pick it out in a crowd, and see it approaching from afar, the experience of the father in the Prodigal Son story.

### So How Do You Know You Can See?

Being able to see is also a spiritual reality. There's little value in physical sight if the mind and heart of the seer is sick. We can reach the point where we are using our eyes mechanically - to avoid hitting trees or falling into ditches - but not using them as windows of our soul. Plenty of people live amid piercingly beautiful sights, seeing nothing of them. A sad thought? O yes: *and suppose I were among them?* Am I really seeing the wonder of my surroundings? Maybe I don't live in the Dolomites or the Cotswolds or the Douro valley, but England is a garden, and the glory of God is around me here for sure! When, as a young priest, I found my presbytery was in a backstreet of an almost wilful

ugliness, I had the grace to thank God for the mighty architecture of the clouds. Do I see the people around me *as God sees them*? But now: do I see the gifts that enrich my life for what they are? Do I know the beauty that is stored in my head and heart, from a life lived amid such blessings? Or am I blind, and growing old in blindness? And too ignorant to know it?

### The Return of the Light

Lent is Spring; the returning sun forms one giant symbol of our birth into eternal life. On a bright, warm morning in spring you get a sniff of the forgotten things of summer: fresh growth, flowering, fruiting, harvest. This seasonal joy is so vital, that I can't think of it as only an accident. It's a beautiful gift from God, and like all such gifts it can mean a huge amount if we let it speak to us. Notice, however, the way in which the man in the Gospel finds his new sight a *dangerous* gift. To be enlightened by Jesus puts him at odds with those Jesus calls *wilfully blind*. Those who accepted him and gave alms to him as a blind man will drive him out as a sighted one.

### The Sacraments We Receive

If the Lord sends us to wash, and opens our eyes, our lives cannot stay the same. We have been earthbound and pagan. Now we are to live as children of the dawn. The ground on which we stood to beg is no longer our place; now we must become believers and worshippers of the one who gives us sight. The Fourth Gospel says of us, "*We have seen his glory, that of the only Son of God.*" (If only the saying were true that "seeing is believing"!) The same Gospel ends with "*Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.*" Between these two statements the story of the Word made flesh is told. Lent must hold the lamp for us as we wait for the Day, showing us our place on the Way of the Cross. We can find here our prayer for Lent and for Holy Week: the blind man's prayer, "Lord, that I may see!" - the prayer of the man in the Gospel today: "Tell me who he is, that I may believe in him!" Jesus replied: "You are looking at him: he is speaking to you."  
*Fr Philip*