

The feeling I have about the great chapter of St John we have just read is first of all about its tremendous and beautiful structure. I notice several things about it straight away:

- first of all, that Jesus appears at the beginning, where the miracle happens, and at the end. In between everything is confusion and tension, as the other characters argue about the meaning of what happened.
- Secondly, the innocent-seeming question that starts the whole incident off is not a curiosity or a piece of idle gossip. Thinly disguised, it is the great question that everyone has to answer before they can come to religious faith: *why is there evil in the world?*
- Thirdly, the bone of contention in the long argument that fills the chapter - what will they decide about the man who opened the eyes of a blind man on the Sabbath? - only slowly makes its impact on the man at the heart of the story. His sight comes to him with colossal impact; but his response to the gift takes time to form.

It almost seems as if the Gospel wants us to take the story as a universal allegory. It starts with a blind man, and ends in a sighted man kneeling before the Light of the World. It begins with the coming of Jesus, and his miracle; it ends with a faith so firm that it fuels a total worship in the one who receives Jesus; we remember the words of St John's Prologue:

*In him was life, that was the light of men,  
a light that shines in the darkness, a light the darkness could not overpower.  
He came to the world that was made by him, and the world did not know him;  
he came to his own domain, and his own people did not accept him;  
but to all who did accept him,  
he gave power to become children of God*

This is the drama that we see played out in the life of a blind man. I am sure that we are meant to see it as a key to the understanding of our own coming to Christ.

In what way are we blind? In one way it scarcely requires an answer, because we are constantly making and remaking our grasp of the world around us and of our own life and its meaning. How often we are educated and re-educated, as the Truth, ancient and ever-new, dawns on us! Every time we find the grace to pray, it is as if we are entering the presence of a God we have only now begun to discover. And the lives we share with each other are similarly a series of revelations: our default attitude should be wonderment, if not other less welcome modes of shock, confusion, and disorientation. What we call *clearsightedness* isn't given to us in physical form; it is a deep sense of understanding and of communion with what we see; the fruit of spiritual gifts and hard-won experience, and it is only granted to those who are ready to persevere in a deep love for the truth. We know this because we have met in ourselves and in others an ability to live in denial: to edit what we see, to ignore the signs that appear to us: to turn away from the truth, to scarf up our eyes against seeing what we do not wish to acknowledge.

*Though the light has come into the world,  
men have shown that they prefer darkness to the light,  
for fear that their deeds should be known*

There are so many treasures in the story we read today. The primeval fear that our blindness is there as a punishment is offered to us at the beginning, and Jesus firmly negates it, assuring us that all our disabilities are to be understood as the theatre in which the glorious works of God will be displayed. God creates us in view of the gifts he will bestow on us. We have already seen how our desires, even our tormented desires, are only signs to us of the vastness of the graces that will satisfy them. So now we learn that our darkness is a sign of the light that will succeed it at the coming of Christ: the voice that first resounds over the waters of

chaos says: *Let there be light!* - and the obedience of the blind man to the word of Christ brings him to the water that will dissolve his blindness: a sure sign of baptism, by this time; and we who look forward to the yearly renewal of our rebirth must hear the voice of Christ and recognise the unbinding of our eyes for the Spring reality that it is.

The experience of a man who has never had sight, however impaired, is unimaginable to us. How can we forget what we have seen, and pretend to enter the world of the blind? Conversely, what impact would the explosive arrival of the light have on us if we were the man in the story? His anonymity invites us to identify with him. If we attend to him, he describes what led him to the experience of enlightenment; but his first words about the one who opened his eyes are *I do not know*. It is the sustained pestering of the onlookers, trying to find a way to discredit his experience or eventually himself, that leads him forward to *He is a prophet*, and then to *I was blind and now I can see*, and further to *if this man were not from God, he could do nothing* - which elicits from his hearers the denunciation of his life as the life of a sinner from birth, and his excommunication from the synagogue.

Now he is ready for the encounter towards which the whole story has been directed: that Jesus himself comes to find him, and hears his request for the enlightenment of faith: *Tell me who he is so that I may believe in him*.

The response is simple and eloquent, and offered only to an open heart newly flooded with light: *You are looking at him; he is speaking to you*. The man says *Lord, I believe*, and worships him.