

# *The Fourth Meeting of the Lent Course 2005*

## **The Fourth Sunday of Lent**

The Fourth Sunday (“Laetare”) has as its Gospel the most beautifully-fashioned story: the ninth chapter of the Fourth Gospel - the giving of sight to a man born blind.

First, note that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus doesn’t *work wonders* (that’s the meaning of the word *miracles*). Instead he *gives signs*. Wonders make us reel in amazement. Signs are there to communicate a message. We can always expect the sign Jesus gives to embody the Word of God; and after the marriage-feast of Cana this Gospel gives us a good definition of the sign and its purpose:

*He let his glory be seen, and his disciples believed in him*

This intimate link between the giving of Jesus’ sign and the formation of faith makes this story perfect for the enlightenment of catechumens, and for us who are moving towards the renewal of our baptism on Easter night.

### **The mystery of evil**

The story begins by setting the sign in a dramatic context. The Bible is concerned from the first, in Genesis, with the question of the beginnings of evil; and this is exactly where our story starts today. A baby is born blind: whose fault is that? Surely so grave an infliction must be a sign of punishment: but who deserved it? Jesus turns the question aside:

*Neither he nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him.*

So here is another definition of these signs: they are moments of disclosure, where we see God’s hand at work. The gift of sight which is coming could only be experienced by one who is blind from birth: it isn’t restoration of something lost, but a transforming new gift.

Our first impulse may be to run to our juridical language, and to say: *this blind man is an image of unredeemed humanity, darkened by original sin, and he is going to be cleansed by the redeeming power of Jesus*. But notice how legalistic and juridical we have already become. We are already locked into the language of law, sin, guilt, judgment, condemnation, exculpation and rehabilitation. Jesus undercuts this law-talk: *neither he nor his parents sinned*. It’s as if the man’s blindness is morally neutral.

We are so used to forcing the whole pattern of redemption into St Paul’s mould, as in the Letter to the Romans: *All have sinned; all need to be forgiven; the sacrifice of Jesus takes our sins away; in him we have our way to the Father and the forgiveness of our sins*. But here, in the same major Pauline letter, is a different insight, which might help us in John 9:

I think that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation awaits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its slavery to decay, and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now, hope that is seen is not hope; who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (*Rm 8: 18-24*)

Now, if the creation was “subjected to futility by the will of God, *not by the will of the creation*”, we have a new way of looking at human suffering, no longer primarily to be understood in the context of sin and reconciliation. It is as if we are suddenly allowed to look at the redemption itself in a different frame: that of a divine plan which deliberately placed the whole creation under a disability, but still mysteriously *in hope*, so that when its fulfilment came, it would be greeted as a revelation of the glory of God. But this is exactly what our Gospel says: the themes are common to both: John has the *works* of God being *epiphanied*, and Paul has the *glory* of God being *apocalypted*; but the ideas are practically identical, since all God’s *works* proclaim his *glory*, as the Psalmist says (*Ps 19: 1*):

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God,  
The firmament tells forth the work of his hands*

Jesus then speaks very solemnly an oracle which contains one of the *I AM sayings*. It also gives the story a rooting in the soil of Lent, because it refers to the oncoming Passion: but it gives us the key to the whole succeeding story, and tells us how to read it.

*As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me.  
The night will soon be here when no-one can work.  
As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*

He then makes a paste with his own spittle and the dust, and anoints with it the eyes of the blind man, telling him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam, a name which means “sent”. He goes obediently and washes, and comes away sighted.

That’s the sign: in a chapter of 41 verses, it is all over in two verses. This implies that the actual narrative is very primitive; John has not embroidered it in itself. Let us hold in our minds some of the images of the sign: *dust, anoint, sent, wash*.

- *dust*: in Lent, we hardly need to draw new attention to this word: *remember that you are dust; to dust you will return*. Remember that the bright eyes of this newly-enlightened man have been dust for many centuries, and the very word reminds us of Genesis: *the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth*. This understanding of the ointment made by Jesus dates back at least to St Irenaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> cent.)
- *anoint*: it has carried the meaning of choosing and setting-apart for a special task; it conveys the healing of our nature specifically for the reception of divine gifts. The prophet is anointed to sustain the gift of the word. The king is anointed to sustain the burden of power over others. The priest is anointed to bear the burden of sacrifice. The gift of sight will not be pure gift for this man; it will bring him also ostracism and rejection. So his healing is accomplished by the polyvalent sign of anointing.
- *sent*: this is a powerful word in the Fourth Gospel, since the relationship Jesus claims with his Father is that *he sent me*. A brief examination of the previous and following chapters makes the word “sent” itself something which suggests Jesus the Son of God. This story began with Jesus saying *As long as day lasts, we must carry out the work of the one who sent me*.
- *wash*: the story has from earliest times been used in the liturgy as a text for the catechumenate. The term *enlightenment* for baptism is extremely ancient, and there can be little doubt that our story has been used exactly where we find it today, in the Lenten liturgy.

But despite the wealth of symbolism he has crammed into this two-verse account, it isn’t the sign itself that interests the Evangelist, but its sequel - the effect it has on those who see it and who should be receiving it. The short chapter is a masterly construction, whose plan you can follow on the back of your handout.

It’s always useful in reading the Fourth Gospel to turn back to the tremendous opening chapter, and find the theme you are examining in the Prologue. There we find these words about the Word:

What has come into being through him was life, life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it. The Word was the true light that gives light to everyone: he was coming into the world. He was in the world that had come into being through him, and the world did not recognise him; he came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him, he gave power to become children of God: to those who believed in his name, who were born not from human stock, or human desire, or human will, but from God himself. The Word became flesh: he pitched his tent among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. Indeed, from his fulness we have all received - one gift replacing another: for the Law was given through Moses: grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God: it is the only Son, closest to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Here we can see from our story the master-concept of **light**, filling human beings with **meaning** and **kinship with their Creator** and with Christ through whom they are made. Light brings **knowledge**, symbolised by **sight**, synonymous with **spiritual vision**. Recalling that the sign makes visible **the glory of God**, here is the theme of **incarnation**, whereby *we saw his glory as the only Son of the Father*. Here too is the idea of the new testament replacing the old; our Jews reject Jesus the Light, *because he is not Moses*. In Sunday 2, the Transfiguration, we saw Moses relegated in favour of Jesus, as Peter James and John were *seeing his glory*; and the voice from heaven says, *This is my beloved Son: my favour rests on him: listen to him!* Here, in God's command to *listen to him*, is the theme of **acceptance of the Word**, even if the world rejects him; here is his **appearing** in the world, which brings **judgment** between those who will accept him and those who will not.

In last week's story of the woman at the well, you remember it was Jesus who first asked the woman for water, even though the end of the story will be the woman's coming to Jesus for water. So here: although the story is really about recognising Jesus, it begins with people not recognising the man born blind: *is it he, or not?* There is a common Biblical theme here: *if you cannot judge earthly things aright, how will you understand heavenly things?* Like those who will come to arrest Jesus, and who need lanterns and torches because their journey is in darkness, so the onlookers of this sign will have clouded sight from the beginning: by the end, most of them will have been "registered blind" by the Light of the World in person.

And all of this is being perfectly dramatised in our story. Look at the countering arguments laid out in rows, and you can see how the man born blind advances further and further into **light**, while the sighted opposition plunge deeper and deeper into **darkness**. Three times he confesses his ignorance:

*Where is he?* they asked. He replied, *I have no idea.*  
*I do not know if he is a sinner,* he said. *I only know I was blind, and now I can see.*  
*Who is he, sir,* he said, *so that I may believe in him?*

Despite this admitted ignorance, he is slowly drawing deeper and deeper conclusions about Jesus:

*He is a prophet....he is a man from God....Lord, I believe* (and worshipped him)

Meanwhile, the Pharisees three times make immensely confident statements about what they know to be true about Jesus:

*This man cannot be from God, he does not keep the Sabbath*  
*Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner*  
*We know that God spoke to Moses. We don't even know where this fellow comes from*

whilst in fact they are drowning, sinking deeper and deeper into their wilful ignorance.

The story ends in a judgment of lucid clarity and simplicity, entirely Hebrew in inspiration: Jesus himself is the litmus test. If you see and believe, you will live; if you close your eyes and reject, you are bound for damnation. Notice that the end of the story is aware of the liturgical separation between Synagogue and Church. The enlightened man is on the right side of that gulf: those who refuse the sign have their house left to them. At the doors of certain French Cathedrals, you will see two tall female figures. The one on the left, blindfold, with the closed volume of the Old Testament, is the Synagogue. The one on the right, with open eyes and the open book in her hands, is the Church. You must notice at once the potential polemic against the Jews; and the way we listen to this Gospel must contain no taint of anti-Semitism. The judgment Jesus announces is unconfined to Jews, or Greeks, or Samaritans: it is for all.