

Commentary to the 4th Sunday of Lent (A)

Introduction



There's a light that never sets

We can see some things; others elude us. The scientific knowledge that allows us to examine, monitor, quantify everything that is material is growing at breakneck pace. They make us curious, thrilled and feel proud to the point of inducing some to believe that only what can be seen with the eyes, observed with the senses, checked with the laboratory instrument is true.

But the presumption of having the control over all reality stems from a lack of vision, from blurring the interior and spiritual sight that allows us to glimpse into the mysteries of God, the meaning of life and death, and the ultimate fate of human history.

There is also another kind of blindness, that of those who are convinced that they have the light and ability to give the right value to everything: money, success, career, sexuality, health and sickness, youth and old age, family, children... but draw their confidence from the scale of values of this world. They have deducted—perhaps without realizing it—by instincts and emotions of the moment, the calculations involved, ideologies and economic systems contaminated by sin, from the gossip room: false lights, unreliable sparkles, wisps and misleading glows.

“The true light that enlightens everyone came into the world” (Jn 1:9). Christ came to dispel our darkness, to illuminate our nights, to usher in the family of the “children of light and children of the day” (1 Thess 5:5).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“You are the light of the world. Whoever follows you has the light of life.”

----- 1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel -----

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1b,4a,6-7,10-13a

“The reasoning of mortals is worthless and our thoughts uncertain because a perishable body weighs down the soul.” So the author of the Book of Wisdom warns against the danger of vouchsafing excess, naive trust in the human criteria of judgment (Wis 9:14).

Will the Prophet, to whom the Lord entrusts his projects and reveals his mysteries, be free from petty constraints? Not at all: He remains a man. It is even hard for him to tune in his thoughts to those of God. He too needs to purify his eyes if he wants to contemplate reality through the eyes of the Lord. It is what happened to Samuel, the man of God sent to Bethlehem to anoint the one whom the Lord had chosen as king.

We are in 1020 B.C. and the people of Israel is going through a difficult time because of the Philistines that press upon them from every side. A brave, skillful and clever man could probably be able to contain the arrogance of such powerful enemies, but where to find him?

One day the Lord makes it clear to Samuel that he had chosen the right man: a young man of Bethlehem, a son of Jesse.

The prophet sets off towards that town. He looks for the house of Jesse. He enters and tells what the Lord has revealed. Jesse is enlightened, is beaming because God has chosen one of his sons as king of Israel. But who among them? he asks himself. He has many sons. After a moment’s hesitation, he thinks. Certainly, the chosen one is Eliab the firstborn. He is tall, proud, handsome. It cannot be him! Even Samuel is struck by the appearance of the young man, by the imposing stature, but in his interior, the voice of the Lord tells him: “No, it’s not him.”

A little disappointed, Jesse presents to the Prophet, one after another, all his beautiful, vigorous, shrewd seven children and yet none of them is chosen. Samuel also looks puzzled and bewildered. He then asks Jesse: “Don’t you have other children?” “Yes—he answers—I have one yet, but he’s a teenager. It is absurd that God chooses him for a mission so challenging when he can rely on far more capable people”. The prophet now begins to see reality with new eyes, those of God. He says, “Go, take him, because he is the chosen one.”

The choice of God is strange, even illogical. His behavior is not easy to understand. It is not the first time that he acts in a way contrary to human criteria. From the very beginning of the Bible, he shows a preference for Abel than Cain. The sacred text does not explain the reason (it does not say that Abel was good and Cain bad). The reason is another: Hebel (Abel) in Hebrew means “vanity”, that without consistency, therefore, it indicates one that does not count. Abel is hebel and is also the weakest and the smallest: he has everything that attracts the eye of God. In the Bible, this is the first manifestation of the preferences of the Lord, for those who have no value.

Later he will choose a people. He will observe the Egyptians: very religious, builders of pyramids and knowers of scientific secrets. He will take into consideration the Babylonians: rich, powerful and advanced in every field of knowledge but will not choose them. He will prefer Israel because she was the smallest (Dt 7:7-8). To free his people from the Midianites he will call Gideon, who unbelievably say, “Pardon me, Lord, but how can I save Israel? My family is the lowliest in my tribe and I am the least in the family of my father” (Jdg 6:15).

Jesus will behave in the same way. He will give priority to the small ones, the sinners, the poor, the shepherds, the despised people and will make them the first guests at the banquet of the Kingdom.

How can one explain these predilections of God? The answer lies in the central part of the reading. He does not see people as we see them. Our gaze contemplates the external and does not go beyond the surface. It often focuses on the ephemeral while his goes to the heart. Even Samuel, the man of God, the prophet of the Lord, hesitated for a moment and was dazzled by appearances. It is, therefore, easy for this to happen. Without even realizing it, we express superficial and unjust judgments about people. The first reading invites us to take note and re-examine them in the light of God’s judgments and gaze.

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14

In the Bible, the struggle between good and evil is often presented with the image of the antithesis between light and darkness. “Light cannot coexist with darkness,” says Paul to the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:14). The drama lies in the fact that man can choose darkness and away from God who is light (1 Jn 1:5,7).

For the Semites—who had assimilated many aspects of Persian dualistic conceptions—the east, where the sun rises, was the symbol of God, while the west recalled the evil one. In one of his famous baptismal catechesis, Cyril of Jerusalem (IV century) reminded his followers: “Turning away from the west, you have stretched your hands and you have renounced Satan because the west is the place of the thick darkness and the empire of Satan is in the darkness.”

The exhortations contained in the reading must be placed in the context of this mentality.

Christians are reminded that, through baptism, they have passed from darkness to light, so the works of light are expected from them. Paul calls and sums them up: every kind of goodness, justice, and truth. As for the works of darkness—he continues—they are so shameful that those who do them are hiding, afraid of the light and instinctively seeks the darkness.

The Apostle finally suggests the way to counter evil works: the open and determined denouncement (v. 13). The shameful acts must be condemned firmly. One must not try to justify, excuse and make them somehow acceptable. The mere fact of calling them by their name and not by equivocal circumlocutions means putting them into the open. It is similar to project on them a beam of light that deprives them of their most valuable protection. When there is no darkness, evil works are out of their living environment.

It is a reference to the duty of every Christian to courageously denounce that which is a disorder. The danger of getting ensnared in false reasonings, which leads to calling “good evil and evil good” (Is 5:20), always impends also on Christians.

Gospel: John 9:1-41

From the early days of the church, the story of the man born blind is proposed in Lent.

The reason is easy to understand: in the story of the man born blind every Christian can easily recognize his own story. Before meeting Christ he was blind, then the Master gave him his sight. He enlightened him in the water of the baptismal font. When, after Constantine, they began to build the first baptismal fonts, they were given the name of photisteria: places of enlightenment.

In today’s passage, John is inspired by an episode in the life of Jesus. He uses it to develop the central theme of the Christian message: the salvation given by Christ.

He uses a biblical language: the dark–light contrast. In the Bible, darkness always has a negative connotation. They are the symbol of the dark power of evil, death, destruction. Light instead represents the orientation towards God, the choice of good and life.

The healing of the man born blind is placed in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn 7:2). It is the most popular of all the Jewish feasts, simply called “the feast.” It was celebrated for a week and characterized by an explosion of joy and liturgies of light and water.

On the esplanade of the temple, lit every night by large torches, there was a well from which they drew water for libations. It referred to the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will draw water with joy from the very fountain of salvation” (Is 12:3). On the second day of the feast, the rite of the “joy of the well” was celebrated with dancing and singing. Jesus waited for “the last day, the most solemn feast” to stand and cry out in a loud voice: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink” (Jn 7:37). It was during this festival of light that he also proclaimed: “I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have light and life” (Jn 8:12).

To grasp the density of the message of today’s Gospel, this festive context and the references to light and water should be noted. The blind will come to see the light only after washing with water of the Sent One.

We will divide the passage into seven parts as if they were seven scenes of a theatrical work.

The first scene (vv. 1-5) opens with a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Their intervention is clearly a literary device by which Jesus offers the opportunity to give the key to reading the episode. If the passage is reduced to a journalist’s report, the symbolism of the healing of the man born blind would not be grasped. The central message is lost: Jesus “is the light of the world” (vv. 4-5).

The question of the disciples is perhaps also ours: “Why is this man born blind? Who sinned: he or his

parents?” (v. 2).

At the time of Jesus it was believed that, in his infinite justice, God would reward the good and would punish the wicked already in this world, in proportion to their works. The misfortunes, diseases, and sufferings were considered a punishment for sins.

This theology—dictated by logic and by human criteria—has never been easy to defend. Job mocked it: “Why do the wicked live, increase in age and in power? Their descendants flourish in their sight, their kinsfolk and their offspring. They live out their days in happiness and go down to Sheol in peace” (Job 21:7-8,13) and to those who objected him he answered: “His children will pay for his sin. What does he care about his family when he dies, when his months have been cut off?” (Job 21:19-21).

Despite these compelling reasons, the theology of “just compensation” was accepted by all. To explain the birth of a disabled person, it even came to suppose that he had sinned in the mother’s womb.

The position that Jesus takes on the subject is clear and enlightening. “Neither was it for his own sin nor for his parents’ sin” (v. 3). It is a blasphemy to speak of God’s punishments. It is a pagan way to imagine it. When the Bible speaks of “God’s punishments” it employs an archaic language that is not ours. It intends to denounce the disasters caused by sin, not by God. Today it is incorrect and misleading to use the metaphor of “God’s punishment” without immediately clarifying the meaning.

It does not make sense to ask who is guilty in front of evil. The only thing to do is to eliminate it, as Jesus did.

Speaking of the blind man, Jesus says: “He was born blind so that God’s power might be shown in him” (v. 3). Each event is ambivalent. We have cataloged the events into good and bad, but each of them can be good or bad. Depending on how one lives it, it turns into salvation or marks a defeat.

The blind man is not guilty of being born so.

The Johannine symbolism appears here: blindness is the condition in which man is born. It’s not his fault nor of others. He is blind and has not even the faintest idea of what light is. So it’s true that he never thinks of asking to be healed by Jesus. It is Jesus who takes the initiative to heal him, and with his gesture, he shows that his salvation (his light) is a completely free gift.

Where Jesus is, there is light; it is day. Where he is absent, it is night (v. 5).

In the second scene (vv. 6-7) the healing of the blind man is referred to in very few words. The method used there is rather strange: the mud, saliva... Jesus adapts to the mentality of the people of his time who believed that saliva is a concentration of breath, of the spirit, of the strength of a person. In this gesture—sometimes accomplished by Jesus (Mk 7:33,8,23)—there is perhaps a reference to the creation of man told in the book of Genesis (2:7). The evangelist wants to insinuate the idea that by the breath, the Spirit of Jesus, the new and enlightened man is born.

The blind man does not recover immediately. He has to go and wash in the water of Siloam. John notes that this name means Sent. The reference to Jesus—the One sent by the Father—is explicit. He is God’s

water, that which was promised to the Samaritan woman, who cures the man's blindness.

The third scene introduces the first of the interrogations of the blind (vv. 8-12).

Enlightened by Jesus, he becomes unrecognizable and is completely changed. Even the neighbors, who for years have lived next door, ask themselves: "Is this the beggar who used to sit here or not?"

It is the image of the man who, from the day he became a disciple, is transformed to such an extent as not to seem any longer the same person. Before he led a corrupt life, intractable, selfish, greedy, grumpy, but now not anymore. His way of thinking, speaking, judging, evaluating people and events, tackling problems, reacting to provocation is changed. The water which is the word of Christ has opened his eyes. It made him discover how meaningless was the life he led. It created a new and enlightened man.

The path of the disciple towards the full light is long and tiring. The evangelist presents it with the image of the blind man who began his journey when he meets the man Jesus. "The man called Jesus made a mud paste" and they ask him: "Where is he?" He answers: "I don't know." He confesses his ignorance; he recognizes not knowing anything about him.

The starting point of the spiritual journey of the disciple is the awareness of not knowing Christ and to feel the need to know something more.

In the fourth scene (vv. 13-17) the religious authorities intervened and submitted the blind man to a second interrogation. They do not bother to check what happened. They have already decided that they must condemn Jesus because he does not correspond to the idea of a religious man they have in mind. Claiming the right to speak in the name of God, they classify him among the wicked, the enemies of the Lord according to the rules and criteria established by them.

This conviction of being right and not needing any other light, the refusal to call into question their theological certainties, leads them to say arrogantly, "That man is not from God" (v. 16). They are blind but convinced that they can see.

The position taken by these Pharisees is a reminder of the danger of anyone who starts to know Christ. He clings to his own securities and convictions. He stubbornly refuses any change and will remain a slave to the darkness.

The blind man who is conscious of "not knowing" instead moves a second step. When the Pharisees ask him: "What do you think of this man?", he replies: "He is a prophet" (v. 17). At first, he thought he was a simple man, now he realizes that he is something more, he is a step higher: he is a prophet.

The fifth scene (vv. 18-23) tells of a new interrogation. This time the authorities call into question the blind man's parents. They hold the power and they cannot tolerate that someone puts into question their beliefs and their prestige. Who dares to oppose them must be taken away. They are so powerful that even the parents are afraid to take a stand in favor of their son.

It is the story of anyone who is enlightened by Christ. He is no longer understood, is abandoned and

sometimes even betrayed by the people most dear, those from whom one would expect encouragement and support.

It's always difficult and risky to take the side of the truth: the fear of alienating the friendship of the people that matters or the sympathies of those in power, often leading to failure to intervene when it should, causing reticence and guilty silence.

In the sixth scene (vv. 24-34), the religious authorities call the blind man back into question.

In his replies and attitude, we can grasp the characteristics that distinguish those who are enlightened by Christ.

– He is first of all free: he does not sell his head to no one; he says what he thinks. “He is a prophet”—he says, referring to Jesus. When they argue: “We know that this man is a sinner” he even allowed himself to be ironic: “I do not know whether he is a sinner or not; I only know that I was blind and now I see” and, soon after, he is even more scathing, he adds: “It is amazing that you do not know where the man comes from....”

– He is brave: he rejects any form of subservience, not intimidated by those who are abusing their power, when they insult, threaten, and resort to violence (vv. 24ff).

– He is sincere: he does not renounce to tell the truth even when this is uncomfortable or not welcomed by those who are at the top, who are used to getting approvals and applause from flatterers.

– He is simple as a dove, but also cautious. The authorities are trying to trap him, forcing him to admit that he is on the side of the one who “does not keep the Sabbath.” With ability, he escapes the trap: “I have told you already, why do you want to hear it again?” He lodges a new ironic jab: “Do you also want to become his disciples?” (v. 27).

– He keeps a constant attitude of research: he knows of having glimpsed something, of having grasped part of the truth, but he is aware that many things are still escaping. The authorities are convinced that they already see clearly; they think they know it all: “We know that this man is not from God” (v. 16); “we know that he is a sinner” (v. 24); “we know that God spoke to Moses” (v. 29). He who was blind, however, has always recognized his limits: “Where is this man, I do not know” (v. 12); “I do not know whether he is a sinner or not” (v. 25). When Jesus will ask him if he believes in the Son of man, he will answer: “Who is he?” recognizing, once again, his own ignorance (v. 36).

– Finally, he resists pressure and fear. He suffers violence but does not give up the light received. Rather than going against his conscience, he prefers to be kicked out of the institution (v. 34).

In the last scene (vv. 35-41) Jesus reappears.

Everything is turned as if he does not exist. He does not intervene any longer. He lets the blind man juggle alone in the midst of difficulties and conflicts.

The enlightened disciple does not need the physical presence of the Master. The strength of his light is

enough to remain firm in the faith and make consistent choices.

At the end, Jesus intervenes and pronounces his judgment, the only one whose judgment matters when it comes to deciding the success or failure of a man's life. He says: at the beginning, there was a blind man, and many saw him. Now the situation is reversed: those who were convinced of seeing, in reality, are those with an incurable blindness. And the man who was conscious of his blindness, can now see.

How Jesus is called in the story must be noted: for the authorities—for those who can see—he is “such man”, “that man”, “he”; they don't deign to call him by his name. They have eyes but they don't want to see who he is.

The blind man journeys a path of faith which corresponds to that of every disciple. At the beginning Jesus is for him a simple “man” (v. 11), then he becomes a “prophet” (v. 17), and then a “man of God” (vv. 32-33), and at the end, the “Lord” (v. 38). The last title is the most important. It is that title with which Christians proclaimed their faith. Before coming to be immersed in the water of the photisterion, during the solemn ceremony of the Easter vigil, each catechumen declares in front of the whole community: “I believe that Jesus is the Lord.” From that moment he is welcomed among “the enlightened”.

Fr. Fernando Armellini with commentary for today's Gospel: <http://www.bibleclaret.org/vid>

Fr. Fernando Armellini - www.bibleclaret.org