

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 30th 2014

This fourth Sunday of Lent stands in the middle of three weeks – the third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent – in which the Church performs public scrutinies of those who will join us through baptism or confirmation at Easter. These scrutinies aren't tests, they're times when we get to celebrate publicly that those who are in the process of joining the Church are coming to know the same Jesus around which our community is formed. This is the Jesus who, as we heard last weekend, responds with living water to our thirst as he responds to the thirst of the Samaritan woman. This is the same Jesus who, as we will hear next week, raises us as he raised Lazarus from the dead. But this week we hear the story of the Jesus who is the light of the world, the one who brings light by bringing sight to the man born blind.

So this is what we have in these three weeks of scrutines: the Jesus of water, light, and life. All primordial signs of the Jesus the Gospel of John shows us, the same one we are always still-coming-to-know ourselves.

Reflection

The Gospel of John is one that demands close attention from us if we're to unpack it. The first thing good attentions shows us is that this passage of John is a sandwich – at the beginning we hear about Jesus and man born blind, and at the end we hear about Jesus and the man born blind. But in the middle, what we have are four trial scenes, four separate incidents where people are being put on trial, being questioned and being judged about what they have seen and heard. As in all trials, the question in these trials is: what is the truth? And, even more, who gets to control the truth?

A last prefatory note. One of the strange things about the story of the man born blind is, not only has he not done anything wrong, he doesn't even ask to be healed. All he does is receive the gift of healing Jesus offers him, and then respond faithfully to it. All he does is say yes to the gift of healing that Jesus gives him, and then refuse to deny this gift after he's been given it.

The strange thing is – and I bet we know this in our own lives as well – that its very refusal to deny the truth of what has happened to him that causes him to be put on trial.

The first trial isn't in a court before judges, it happens right after the man has been healed and takes place in his own home. He goes home, to his neighbors and friends, and they simply don't believe it's him. These are the people who have known him all his life – they saw him born blind, they know who he is, what his limits and gifts, the mistakes he's made; they know his place in the world. So when the man born blind tells them the story of how he's changed, how his place in the world is different know,

when he tells them about Jesus and the clay and washing in the pool and being healed... they don't believe him. Even more, they turn him in to authorities. They say: we are not going to believe you until the authorities say that it is safe for us to believe you. And all the man born blind has done is tell the story of what he has experienced: I met a man and he healed me.

The second trial happens before those authorities, and they will not stand for the man born blind's story. They already know that he cannot be telling the truth because they already know how God can act in the world. They already know that anybody from God, anybody holy, does not heal on the Sabbath. So either he is lying or his healing doesn't come from God. They know this. But the man born blind just tells his story: I met a man and he healed me.

Because he won't recant the authorities need verification, so where do they go? In a third trial they bring in the man born blind's parents. And at this point they just want this to go away, they already know he's lying they just need the parents to verify it. "Just say that he wasn't born blind," they say, "just tell us that he was always able to see and all this trouble will go away." All the parents have to do is tell them what they want to hear. But they can't do it. Although neither can they tell the truth, because they're afraid – afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue, that they'll be banished from the place where they encounter God. So, they take the middle route, plead the 5th. "We don't know! He's an adult ask him!" they say.

So that's what the authorities do. They bring the man born blind back in for more questioning, and in this fourth trial they won't take no for an answer. They are going to make this go away. After all, they already know how God acts in the world, and God does not heal on the Sabbath. "Give God the praise," they say, "we know this one who healed you is a sinner."

His friends have turned their backs on him. He's been arrested and brought to trial more than once. His parents have been brought in for questioning, and even they didn't support him. He stands, a beggar, before the most powerful people in the city, people who promise to make this all go away if he will just say a few simple words. All this struggle because of a healing. It would be so easy.

But he can't do it. Instead he is faithful to what he experienced. He tells the truth: I met a man and he healed me.

And the authorities throw him out.

What does it mean to stay faithful?

We learn from the man born blind that it means refusing to believe that we have not been healed. It means refusing to be pressured, cajoled, coerced into lying about the healing we've experienced at the hands of Jesus. It means refusing to be a false witness to our own experience of the holiness of God. It means that when others deny our holiest experiences, deny that we can become someone other than who we've been, that we refuse to believe them.

And not just refuse to believe them, but affirm our belief in Jesus – the one who spit in the dirt, rubbed that clay balm onto our eyes, and sent us to wash in the waters of baptism. The one loved us into wholeness. We believe our experience of Him.

We have all had experiences like this, experience of being put on trial, of being pressured to doubt that what has happened to us is real. Sometimes these doubts even come from our very selves.

And it can be hard to stay faithful when it seems like God isn't there, when, like the man born blind, it feels like we have to stand alone before all those doubting authorities inside and outside of us. The same thing happens in the Gospel. It's only after the trials are over that Jesus reappears to the man born blind. He's been gone the entire time – and the question we might rightly want to ask is: where did you go, Jesus? Why weren't you there with the man born blind in his trial? Why haven't you been there in my own? The answer the Gospel gives us is that he was there – he was there in the very person of the man born blind. In our person as we undergo our own trials.

Now, you might be thinking: "that's a very nice thing to say and I don't have any unique problem with it, but is it really true?" Is that really what the Gospel says? Actually, yes it is, and in two unique ways. The first happens during the first trial, when the man born blind is talking with his neighbors and says "I AM" – something that only Jesus says in the entire rest of the Gospel. In his affirmation of his experience of healing, in trusting what has happened to him, he has already started to take the place of Jesus. The second comes when we recognize that the entire set of trials that the man born blind is subjected to are mirrors of the trials that Jesus will be subjected to before his own crucifixion. What the man born blind goes through – what we go through – is exactly what Jesus went through.

So what are we to learn from this? It will sound familiar. We learn that when we accept the healing offered by Jesus, when we're baptized into him like the man born blind washes in the pool, we will undergo the exact same trials that Jesus had to undergo. Because to be baptized is to be commissioned to take His place in the world.

This is why what we are doing as we scrutinize the candidates over these three weeks of Lent is so important. We are not testing them; we're inviting them into our experience of a God who asks us to remain faithful through trials. We are welcoming them into a community formed by a Gospel that asks us to accept the fact that it is our job, as the baptized, to do in our own unique ways what Jesus did. We are asking them to remain faithful to their own experiences of being healed even when they too are put to trial. We are asking for their support in our own efforts to remain faithful to our experiences of that same Jesus.

And we do all of this so that we can be sent forth to give water, light, and life to a world that needs it very badly; that needs, very badly, the unique incarnation of Christ we are becoming.

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