

John 9:1-41

Most of the characters that populate the pages of this gospel are literary or fictionalized creations of the author, and were never real people who ever lived. None of the miracles called “signs” in this book actually happened. John fills his work with literary or fictional, not historical, characters and weaves around them his interpretation of Jesus.

Today’s story features a character in John’s drama who is not only mythological, but is also a corporate figure, a representative symbol. He stands for the members of the Johannine community, who saw themselves as having once lived in the darkness of not seeing, but having been changed when “the light of the world” permeated their darkness. The light brought to them a new perspective, which relativized everything that they had once assumed as “truth”. This in turn increased their anxiety, making it necessary for them to choose whether they would embrace the light or deny it. Would they step into the light and walk with courage into the unknown, exposing themselves to the new realities that living in the light always brings? Those are the choices that new light, new perceptions and new insights always bring.

This story was a code-like description of what the people who made up the Johannine community endured when they discovered that, for their part, they could no longer live inside the context of their traditional faith system. At the same time, the synagogue leaders had reached the conclusion that the synagogue could no

longer tolerate the insights of these followers of Jesus, so they ousted the Johannine community.

Our story begins in the previous chapter, as Jesus is being buffeted by those the author describes simply as “the Jews”. Again, this was not an expression of anti-Semitism. Whatever John meant by setting up “the Jews” as the enemy of Jesus, it was not an ethnic definition, but a theological one born out of the separation, the fracture, that caused the synagogue authorities to define the followers of Jesus as no longer Jews and caused these followers to define themselves as the “new Israel”, an Israel in which all limits were transcended. Jews who were able to see the meaning of Jesus were included in that new community; they were the core of the Jesus movement. Women were included, as well as the Samaritans and Gentiles.

A prayer written in the Middle Ages became a well-known hymn: *“Dear Lord, three things I pray, to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day”*. The story of the healing of a blind beggar is not just about the sign. It is about seeing reality and seeing Jesus more clearly today.

Do we want our eyes opened to the truth? So often we don’t want to look at the truth of our world as it is, with its injustices, violence and hatred, the oppression of the weak and of minorities, the divisions between rich and poor. We do not want to see our own inner reality, our brokenness and fear. We pretend that everything is all right and that we are all right. Why are we frightened of the truth? Is it because everything seems so terrible, that if we see reality too clearly we will fall into despair?

Yet, if we seek deeper, we will find, underneath our brokenness, the beauty in our own hearts and in the heart of each person: our capacity to love, to give life and to take our place in the world – with others – to become a source of life and hope. If we saw more clearly, if our eyes of faith, were opened, we would, discover an immense hope coming from Jesus. This hope would imply change.

Today's episode begins with a question. The disciples ask Jesus: Who is to be blamed for this man having been born blind? The common theological wisdom of that day held that sickness and tragedy were instruments of divine punishment. Religion had proclaimed that, with all-powerful, supernatural God in charge, there must be an explanation of human pain and tragedy that protected the justice of God. So, sickness meant that someone was getting what was deserved. Since this particular man's status of blindness had predated his birth, it was hard to see him as being guilty of some covert act of wickedness and thus deserving of his blind status, so the disciples speculated that his blindness must have been punishment inflicted on his parents.

That retributive-punishment perspective is what the author of the Fourth Gospel assumes to be the view of the defenders of traditional Jewish religion. So John has Jesus respond to the disciples' query by saying that neither the man born blind nor his parents were at fault, but that this man's affliction was meant to be used to make manifest a new understanding of God, a new vision of what human life can be when born to a new consciousness. It is Jesus' purpose to be the "light of the world" that is on trial here. So Jesus, using the name "I AM" and claiming an identity

with God in the words “I am the light of the world”, approaches the symbolic old Israel, now portrayed as a man who was born blind.

In John’s story Jesus mixes spittle with clay, rubs it on the eyes of the man born blind, and then directs him to wash in the pool of Siloam. There may also be in this story an echo of Elisha curing Naaman of the symptoms of leprosy by having him bathe in the waters of the Jordan River. In the midrashic tradition of the Jews, the details of healing stories are frequently recycled. It was another way that the biblical authors signalled that they were not literalists, but interpreters of a new God experience.

Saliva was widely regarded in the ancient world as a medicine for a variety of afflictions, from blindness to epilepsy to various skin disorders. Christians are uncomfortable with this type of healing story because it makes Jesus seem like a pagan magician. But the belief in the healing power of saliva seems to have been very deeply rooted in Jewish culture. The Babylonian Talmud contains several references to saliva as medicine. Saliva from the mouth of someone who had not eaten upon awakening was considered a particularly effective ointment. And because it is a medicine par excellence, it could not be used on the Sabbath.

John’s symbolic story of the man born blind is right in line with this Jewish practice. This man was living in darkness, which was for John the status of his enemies and the enemies of his community – those he called “the Jews”, by which he meant those descendants of Abraham who could not move out of the limits of

darkness into the transforming light that Jesus came to be and to provide.

Once restored by the light and blessed with the ability to see, this man born blind then set off a debate about his identity. The religious authorities first sought to determine whether this was a case of mistaken identity. Was this man really the formerly blind man who had once sat and begged in the city, or was he someone who just looked like that blind beggar? The now-seeing man maintained that his identity was real; he was in fact the blind beggar. Once again the religious establishment was offended because this healing had occurred on the Sabbath, diminishing the power of their religious rules.

The Pharisees vigorously interrogated the man. How did the man called Jesus do this wondrous thing? The formerly blind man related the details, only to have his explanation rejected once more. This action cannot be of God, the authorities said, since it violates the Sabbath law; God cannot and would not violate God's own law! So this Jesus, they concluded, must be a sinner. Others then entered the debate, drawn by the irrationality of this religious argument. If you say he is not of God, you must explain how he can accomplish this wonder, they said. The Pharisees dismissed this argument as a challenge to their authority and returned to the man born blind. "What do you say about this Jesus?" they inquired. "He is a prophet", came the man's first answer.

These gendarmes of religious purity were not content with that. So certain were they that he could not have been born blind that they proceeded to call his

parents to interrogate them. This led only to more frustration. “This is our son”, the parents said, “and he was born blind, but how he has regained his sight or who did it are questions that he alone is competent to answer.”

John then adds a comment, noting that they gave this answer “for fear” of those who ran the synagogue, for these leaders had proclaimed that anyone who professed Jesus as the Christ was to be expelled from the synagogue. The tensions that marked the excommunication in the 80s and 90s of the first century are, in John’s editorial comment, being read back into the life of the Jesus of history.

So the authorities renewed their interrogation of the man born blind. This debate opened with the authorities saying God alone could do these things, not this man Jesus, who, by violating the Sabbath, revealed that he was a sinner. The now-seeing man replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I do know”, he added: “I was blind, now I see.”

“How did he do it?” the authorities asked, in obvious irritation at this challenge to their understanding of “truth”. The now-seeing man replied: “I have told you once and you did not believe. Why do you want to hear it again?” Then he stepped up his defence by going on the offense: “Do you want to become his disciple?” Recoiling in denial at such a possibility, they proceeded to revile him, saying: “You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know God has spoken to Moses”, they added – that is the claim of the sacred scriptures – “but we do not know the origins of this man.” To this strange argument the formerly blind man said: “This is a marvel!

You do not know where he comes from, but he has opened my eyes.” If this man were not of God, he could not have done this wonder.

Recognizing that the facts were not sustaining their traditional view, the authorities resorted to anger and denunciation, as religious defenders of the faith are prone to do: “You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?” And they cast him out of the synagogue. You cannot be right, they appeared to say. If you are right, then our religion is wrong. Every religious institution and every religious form in history has had at some point in its history to walk through this doorway.

Jesus, hearing that the formerly blind man had been expelled from the faith community in which that man had been raised, went to find him. The followers of Jesus, at the time of the writing of the gospel, had endured a similar expulsion. John clarified the issues: “Do you believe in the son of man?” Jesus asked, using the most popular of the messianic titles. “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?” the man replied. “You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you”, Jesus responded. “Lord, I believe”, the man said, and he *worshipped* Jesus. Since worship was reserved for God alone, the author of this gospel was asserting that God had been met, had been engaged, and was indeed present in the life of this Jesus.

Then John had Jesus explain that narrative: “For judgment, I came into this world that those who do not see may see and those who see [or who claim to see] may become blind.” Then it dawns on the established religious leaders what Jesus is saying: *They* are the ones who are blind. *They* were born blind. In Jesus God has

offered them light and seeing. If they were really blind, they would be guiltless. Their guilt lies in the fact that they claim to see when they do not see.

The conflict between the Jewish Johannine community and the Jewish synagogue leaders was intense. It had to do with their response to the Jewish Jesus as the light of the world. If the Jewish traditionalists could not move out of the past, and walk in the light that Jesus came to give, said John, they were choosing to live in darkness, to hide in the religious security of yesterday. That, John asserted, is to make a virtue out of closed minds. That is to pretend to be seeing when in fact one is still blind. That is to act as if the truth of God had been or could be captured in the religious forms of the past. That is to refuse to step into the new life being offered, the new consciousness that invites the world into a new and unlimited understanding of what life is all about. That is to refuse to step beyond human limits into the universal consciousness that Jesus opens for all to see and to enter.

Some people can turn the world of God and revelation into an ideology. They judge only from the written word of God as they interpret it and refuse to listen to reality and experience and to see the presence of God there. Others completely reject Scripture. For them only experience matters. They cut themselves off from the word of God, which reveals the meaning of reality.

Scripture is the story of God's encounter with the world, with people and with the history of humanity. Revelation flows from events that are given meaning through the prophets and holy people who see God's presence in these events.

Some of the Pharisees deny the truth of this healing and refuse to discern whether God is present in it or not. They have a pre-judgment concerning Jesus, whom they have already determined cannot be from God. The Pharisees are not the only ones who are closed up in an ideology refusing to listen to reality. We all are to some degree.

We cling to our own ideas, laws, doctrines, or religion, refusing to recognize the manifestation of God in reality, in those inside or outside our group. Aristotle was passionately interested in all that existed, in all that was human. Shouldn't seekers of God be open and passionately interested in all that speaks of God and manifests God in creation, in all that we are discovering about this creation through science and in the hearts of people in different churches, traditions, religions and other groups?

We all need to belong to a community, to be well rooted in a faith, a church, a vision of God and of reality. We need to deepen our understanding of the word of God. We are left impoverished if we are not passionate for the truth in all its manifestations and if we no longer see how God is being revealed in our world.

Why are we blinded by the manifestation of God? Is it because we are comfortable and secure in our way of life, our certitudes and our feelings of elitism and do not want to change? The God of Love and the love of God are calling us to go forth on this journey to union with God. That means deepening our interior life – which is our only real security – in order to walk more confidently into the things God

may be calling us to.

That is why we need to, John said, understand that Jesus is *“the way, the truth and the life”*. That is why Jesus can claim that he is the doorway into eternity, the only pathway into God. Jesus the fully human one, offers the only pathway to God because the pathway into divinity can be found only through the expansion and the transcendence of the limits of the human.

Amen.