

Fourth Week of Lent

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Sunday, March 19

BLINDNESS IN THE CULTURE OF JESUS

From John Pilch on the *Sunday Web Site of St. Louis University*

Secrecy, deception, and lying are integral parts of Mediterranean culture and valued strategies for maintaining and preserving honor. Westerners are often baffled by this.

Today's gospel reading about healed blindness reveals glimpses of secrecy, deception, and lying in Mediterranean culture.

While the ancient world certainly knew blindness as a real physical condition, they seemed to consider it no worse than ignorance or a stubborn refusal to understand.

Luke writes of Jesus: "on many that were blind he bestowed sight" but he reports only one specific healing of a physically blind person!

On the other hand, Luke-Acts reports many instances of people who refused to "see or understand" as well as people who chose to "see or understand." There thus seems to be greater interest in metaphorical than physical blindness.

In today's gospel story of John's report of the man who was blind from birth, both motifs are played out strongly. It is futile to argue about the man's physical condition. He and his parents said he had been physically blind; others doubted or denied it.

But the controversy stirred by the man's cure ranges beyond physical blindness to deception and lying. This is a fruitful area for reflection.

After the healing, there is confusion about the man's identity. "It is he," said some, while others countered: "No, but it is someone like him." And the healed man kept insisting: "I am the man!"

In a world without photo IDs and social security numbers, proving personal identity was a real challenge. The Pharisees also seem to accept the healing as a fact but are divided about Jesus' identity: is he a man "from God" or not?

Some hostile Judeans doubt that the healed man ever was blind at all! His parents confirm their son's congenital blindness but evade the hostile questions about the healing. "Ask him. He is old enough to speak for himself."

Hostility and enmity toward Jesus are certainly part of this story. At the same time, there are sincere people really struggling to "see" and "understand" what has happened or who Jesus really is.

The prevalence of secrecy, deception, and lying in this culture explains skepticism as a natural part of day-to-day life, and even make hostility and enmity understandable if not excusable.

The concluding verses of today's gospel illustrate how masterfully Jesus worked within his culture. When needed, he used his powers to heal. In the debates that followed, he drew on his cultured strengths and weaknesses.

The fluctuation between physical and metaphorical blindness is common in the gospel traditions. Jesus' point here, as always, is that physical blindness would be understandable and preferable to the willful metaphorical blindness of those who refuse to believe in him.

Monday, March 20

WHY DID JOSEPH WANT TO LEAVE HIS SPOUSE? From St. Bernard's sermon on St. Joseph

Joseph, her spouse, being just and not wanting to expose Mary, thought he would leave her in a hidden manner. It is well said that, being just, he did not want to expose her: because just as it would not have been just if, knowing her guilt, he had accepted the fact; likewise he would not have been just, if he had condemned her, she being innocent. Since, therefore he was just and did not want to expose her, he decided to leave her in a hidden manner.

Why did Joseph want to leave his spouse, Mary? Listen not to my opinion, but to that of the Fathers. He thought to leave her for the same reason why Peter kept the Lord at a distance, saying, 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner', or the Centurion did not want the Lord to come to his house, saying: 'Lord, I am not worthy that you enter my house'. Likewise, Joseph, retaining himself to be unworthy and sinful, went away saying that he would not be able to live with a woman who was so great, whose wonderful and superior dignity he feared. He saw and feared the woman who bore a certain sign of the divine presence; and since he was not able to penetrate the meaning of this mystery he wanted to leave her in a hidden way. Peter was fearful in the face of such power, the Centurion before the majesty of his presence. Also Joseph, as a man, feared the newness of such a great miracle; he was afraid of the profoundness of such mystery; and decided to leave her in a hidden way.

Do you wonder that Joseph retained himself to be unworthy to share the life of the Virgin, when you hear that also St Elizabeth was not able to remain in her presence, except with fear and reverence. She said, in fact: 'How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me?' Therefore Joseph decided to leave her. But why hiddenly and not publicly? So that the reason for the divorce would not be sought nor the motive asked. What would a just man have been able to reply to a hard headed people that did not believe and which contested. If he had expressed his thoughts regarding what he had experienced of the purity of Mary, would not those cruel and unbelieving Jews have immediately derided him and stoned her? How would they have been able to believe the Truth which remained silent in her womb, they who despised it when it was cried out in the temple? What would they have done to one whom they did not see, if later on they would have laid their wicked hands upon Him when He performed wonderful miracles? Rightly, therefore, the just man, in order not to be obliged to lie, or bring disgrace upon an innocent person, decided to leave Her in a hidden way.

Think also of that great patriarch sold in Egypt, and know that he had not only the name, but also chastity, innocence and grace. That Joseph, sold and led into Egypt due to the envy of his brothers, was a figure of Christ Who was sold; this Joseph, fleeing from the hatred of Herod, brought Christ into Egypt. The first was sold by his brethren, out of envy, and was led into Egypt, thus prefiguring our Saviour's being sold; the second Joseph, that he might avoid Herod's envy, led Jesus into Egypt. The first was faithful to his master, and treated his wife with honour; the second, too, was the most chaste guardian of his bride, the Virgin Mother of his Lord. To the first was given the understanding and interpretation of dreams; to the second, the knowledge of, and participation in, the heavenly mysteries. The first laid up stores of corn, not for himself, but for all the people; the second received the living Bread that came down from Heaven, and kept It both for himself and for the whole world.

Tuesday, March 21

HEALED AND MISSIONED

From a reflection by Alex Lambert in *Denver Catholic*

“Do you want to be healed?”

These words are spoken by Jesus in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John to a sick man lying by the pool at Bethesda in Jerusalem. Although many came to the pool to be healed, this man had persisted unsuccessfully for 38 years. Jesus recognized his plight and asked him a deceptively simple question. What happened next changed everything for him.

This passage is read every year on the Tuesday during the fourth week of Lent, and it's one most Christians have likely heard numerous times. As with many of the things Christ did, hearing it repeatedly can desensitize us to its power and how the words and deeds of Jesus were not only life-giving, but also life-changing.

“Do you want to be healed?” Jesus asks. The man doesn't say yes; instead, he laments, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me.” In the internet series, *The Chosen*, Jesus responds, “I'm not asking about who will help you or won't help you. I'm asking about you. So I ask again: Do you want to be healed?” The man still doesn't answer, but the sorrow on his face speaks his desire. “Rise, take up your mat, and walk,” Jesus says. And the man does. He leaves that pool healed of his affliction, never to return again, and nothing is the same. Everything has changed.

The premise of Christianity, and indeed the entire mission of the Church, rests on this question asked by Jesus. To be healed is to be on mission, and to be on mission is to be healed. Like the man at the pool of Bethesda, both the world and the Church often become so crippled by their own woundedness and sickness that all remnants of hope disappear, and when the perfect embodiment of hope does present himself, they can't recognize him or understand how they could ever be deemed worthy of the opportunity.

This way of thinking is antithetical to everything Jesus Christ proclaims. While it is true we are not deserving of his grace, we must receive it openly in order to be reconciled to the Father and in turn, become missionaries for his kingdom. Sin is a scourge, and the devil is constantly prowling, seeking those weaknesses and wounds to exploit and turn us away from the will of God every chance he gets. This is precisely why Jesus came; to serve as humanity's first and best defense against the attacks of the Enemy. However, it is only through the healing that Jesus alone provides from which authentic transformation and discipleship can flow.

The reality is that Christians live in what C.S. Lewis called “enemy-occupied territory.” This does not mean that non-believers are the enemy of Christians; quite the contrary, in fact. The Enemy is the enemy, and Christians are called to the difficult task of re-claiming God's world, one soul at a time. Jesus Christ set the ideal example for how the Church is to carry out this mission: through mercy, compassion, genuine encounter, and above all, love. However, the mission can only begin once we ourselves have an encounter with he who embodies all those qualities perfectly.

Wednesday, March 22

CONFINED TO THE PRESENT MOMENT

From the writings of Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade S.J.

It is necessary to be disengaged from all we feel and do in order to walk with God in the duty of the present moment. All other avenues are closed. We must confine ourselves to the present moment without taking thought for the one before or the one to come. For is not God's law always under cover, as it were? Something will prompt us to say: 'At the moment I have a liking for this person or this book, or an inclination to take or offer this advice, to make such a complaint, to confide in or listen to this person, or to give away this or to make that.' These stirrings of grace must be followed without relying for a single moment on our own judgment, reason or effort. It is God who must decide what we shall do and when, and not ourselves. When we walk with God, his will directs us and must replace every other guidance.

Each moment imposes a virtuous obligation on us which committed souls faithfully obey. For God inspires them with a desire to learn one moment what, in the next, will uphold them in the practice of virtue. They are drawn to read this or that, to observe and reflect upon the smallest happening. IN this way everything that they learn and hear is fresh in their mind and no dedicated novice will carry out her duty better than they do.

In all that these souls do, they are aware only of an urge to act without knowing why. All they can say is: 'I have an urge to write, read, question or observe this. I obey this urge and God, who inspires it, supplies me with a store of knowledge which subsequently I am able to use to the advantage of myself and others.' This is why they must always remain simple, pliant and responsive to the slightest prompting from these almost imperceptible impulses. God, who possesses them, may make use of them in any way for his glory. If they were to resist these impulses, like those who depend on their own efforts and initiative, they would be depriving themselves of countless things essential for the fulfillment of future obligations to the present moment. Since people do not recognize this, such souls are criticized and blamed for their simplicity and they, who blame no one, who are tolerant and understanding of all sorts and conditions, find themselves despised by the falsely wise, who are unable to savour that sweet and refreshing submission to God's commands.

Could the worldly wise tolerate that incessant wandering of the Apostles who never settled anywhere? Likewise the pious in general cannot tolerate those who thus wait on divine guidance for their moment to act. Only a very few do, and God, who touches men through their fellows, always puts them in touch with those who are faithful in their submission to him.

Thursday, March 23

WITHOUT ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING

From the writings of Catherine Doherty

The answer to our modern problems, whatever they may be, is to turn toward God with lifted hands, moved by love, trusting in God's promises and mercy. There is no other answer. If one stands in intercession with uplifted hands, as Moses did, then the miracle of God's action will take place.

It seems strange, but the prostration of prayer, the dance of prayer, the rock-stillness of prayer, or whatever form prayer may take, floods the whole world with action. He who turns his face to God in prayer is in the eye of the hurricane, the eye of action. Somehow, the miracle takes place. Man remains on the mountain before God; at the same time, by the power of his prayer, it is as if he walks the earth with his towel and his water. Prayer changes things.

When we pray, we have accepted Christ's invitation. Not only did he say, "Cut off from me you can do nothing," but he went on to add, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask what you will and you shall get it."

We must lead each other to the top of the mountain to pray, because prayer is dynamic and holy. It is contact with God and union with him. As a man grows in union, he comes to know that prayer includes all righteousness and from prayer stems all the goodness that God wants to bestow on mankind.

Prayer is a person moved by his whole being to communicate with the living God, to respond to God's love. Prayer is this response that takes a thousand postures, from standing with arms uplifted in supplication to full prostration. Prayer is the movement of a dancer, and prayer is the stone-like stillness of a person utterly immobile, lost in regions that few enter. Prayer is the bubbling brook of a child or quivering words from the lips of old people. Prayer is the words of men, women, and children who know God and easily talk to him. These words change into beautiful songs when they reach God.

People recite the rosary. They pray for all their relatives and all the needs of the world, vocally, simply in a childlike way. Even when they sleep, their hearts watch for the Lord. When they pray, when they worship God, they are caught up in something greater than themselves, something cosmic. The whole universe bows in adoration to God, and those who love him join in that adoration.

God is the only way. He is the only answer. And the only way to lead men to God is to teach them prayer and to pray for them.

Friday, March 24

LEISURE IN BENEDICT'S MONASTERY

From Fr. Michael Casey, OCSO in *Strangers to the City*

Leisure is not idleness or the pursuit of recreational activities. It is, above all, being attentive to the present moment, open to all its implications, living it to the full. This implies a certain looseness in lifestyle that allows heart and mind to drift away from time to time. Monastic life is not a matter of shoe-horning the maximum number of good works into a day. It is more important that monks and nuns do a few things well, being present to the tasks they undertake, leaving room for recuperation and reflection, and expecting the unexpected. Leisure allows openness to the present. It is the opposite of being enslaved by the past or living in some hazy anticipation of a desirable future. Leisure means being free from anything that would impede, color, or subvert the perception of reality. Far from being the headlong pursuit of escapist activities and having fun, authentic leisure is a very serious matter because it is the product of an attentive and listening attitude to life.

Benedict's monastery is a place of leisure because those who live there are committed to a life of mindfulness. Being attentive requires, first of all, that we renounce the desire to control what happens around us, to manipulate reality, to impose our will on events or on other people. We often think that those who try to keep control of everything around them are strong and domineering people, attempting to rule others and to mould them in their own likeness. Usually this is not so. Control-freaks are most often fearful people who are threatened by the prospect that events would be allowed to take an independent direction. Underneath the firm grip and the bluster is a wavering self-confidence that fears to face the unexpected. By constraining everything to squeeze itself into the hard shell of their expectations, they fail to read and respect the reality of the world around them. They are heedless of what is outside themselves because they are driven mercilessly by their own insecurity. Their life is a constant battle to prevent reality from asserting its independence. Their inner voices are shouting so loudly that they can hear nothing else.

We all need to learn the art of silence, to still the clamor that comes from within as well as securing for ourselves a zone where outward noise is sometimes hushed. Above all we need to teach ourselves to become somewhat more silent, because it is through an undisciplined tongue that much of our personal and social disturbance comes. In a world where communication is huge, it takes a fair amount of resolution to create for oneself a sphere of silence, in which external urgencies are put on hold and words are weighed. Just as it is important for us to make "quality time" for people we love, so we need to reserve some moments—and more than moments—for coming to an understanding of what is happening within us and around us. We will never have a listening attitude to life unless we spend time listening. That means we stop talking and we stop engaging in consciousness-absorbing activities and start paying attention. If we do this often enough, it may become semi-habitual.

Of course, such periods of silence and solitude have to be purchased at the expense of other activities, and that is what we do not like. We do not want to give up any of the elements that we have built into our lives, be they ever so trite and paltry. We have first to be convinced of the value of holy leisure. Leisure is empty space. We find it hard to make room for *nothing* in our crowded lives; like nature we abhor a vacuum.

Saturday, March 25

LET HUMILITY PUT ON COURAGE

From St. Bernard's sermon on the Annunciation

You, O Mary, are that virgin in whom and by whom God Himself, our King before all ages, determined to operate our salvation in the midst of the earth. Why do you humbly expect from another what is offered to you, and will soon be manifested through yourself if you will but yield your consent and speak the word? Answer, then, quickly to the angel – yes, through the angel give your consent to your God. Answer the word, receive the Word. Utter yours, conceive the Divine. Speak the word that is transitory, and embrace the Word that is everlasting.

Why do you delay? Why are you fearful? Believe – confess – receive. Let humility put on courage, and timidity confidence. It is certainly by no means fitting that virginal simplicity should forget prudence. Yet in this one case only the prudent virgin need not fear presumption, because, though modesty shone forth in her silence, it is now more necessary that her devotion and obedience should be revealed by her speech.

Open, Blessed Virgin, your heart to faith, your lips to compliance, your bosom to your Creator. Behold, the desired of all nations stands at the gate and knocks. Oh, suppose He were to pass by while you delay! How would you begin again with sorrow to seek Him whom your soul loveth! Arise — run — open! Arise by faith, run by devotion, open by acceptance. *Mary speaks*. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done unto me according to thy word.”

Humility is ever the close companion of divine grace, for “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble”. She answers humbly, therefore, that the throne of grace may be prepared. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” She is the chosen Mother of God, and she calls herself His handmaid. Truly, it is no small sign of humility to preserve even the remembrance of this virtue in presence of so great glory. It is no great perfection to be humble when we are despised; but it is a great and rare virtue to preserve humility in the midst of honours. If, deceived by my apparent virtue, the Church has raised me, an insignificant man, to some small dignity, God permitting it, either because of my own sins, or those of those subject to me, do I not immediately, forgetting my past deficiencies, imagine myself to be that which men, who see not the heart, have reputed me to be? Then I hearken to fame, and attend not to conscience. I forget that honour is rendered to virtue, and take the virtue for granted because of the honour, and so esteem myself the more holy when I find myself in an exalted position. Let us listen to the words of her who, though chosen to be the Mother of God, yet laid not aside her humility. “Behold,” she says, “the handmaid of the Lord, may it be done unto me according to thy word.”

Fiat mihi (“Be it done to me”). *Fiat* is a mark of desire, not of doubt. In saying, “Be it done unto me according to thy word,” she expresses the disposition of one who longs to see the effect, not of one who doubts its possibility. *Fiat* may also be understood as a word of petition, for no one prays unless he believes, and hopes to obtain. God wishes that which He has promised to be asked for, and perhaps promises many things which He had predetermined to bestow, in order that the promise may arouse our devotion, and that what He intends to give gratis we may merit by devout prayer. Thus, our gracious God, Who desires the salvation of all, as it were, extorts meritorious works from us, and while He strengthens our will by His grace, He wishes that what He gives freely we shall labour to obtain.