



Blindness and Sight

[Daniel J. Harrington](#) February 25, 2008

“I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and that those who do see might become blind” (Jn 9:39)

Fourth Sunday of Lent (A), March 2, 2008

Readings: 1 Sm 16:1, 6-7, 10-13; Ps 23:1-6; Eph 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41

The story of the man born blind in John 9 is one of the seven “signs” or miracle stories in the Fourth Gospel. As a sign it points to the central mysteries of our faith—Jesus’ death and resurrection. In a long, complicated process, the man who had been blind since birth comes to see on both physical and spiritual levels, while those who seemed to see perfectly well become increasingly blind. The man born blind is a good symbol for us in the middle of Lent as we try to sharpen our own spiritual sight.

The narrative begins with the disciples’ question about the cause of the man’s blindness. Was it caused by his own sin or that of his parents? Jesus dismisses these explanations and asserts that the “works of God” will be made visible through him. Then in a somewhat unusual (almost magical) procedure, Jesus anoints the man’s eyes with mud and sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Healed, the man is able to see on the physical level. But that is only the beginning of his coming to see the true identity of his healer.

When his neighbors question him, the man affirms that he was indeed healed by “the man called Jesus.” When the Pharisees contend that his healer could not be from God because he healed him on the Sabbath and thereby performed forbidden work, the man asserts that his healer is “a prophet.” The opponents then question his parents about whether their son had really been born blind. Their response is guarded: they confirm that he was born blind and now can see, but they profess ignorance about his healer. When the opponents summon the man again and try to make him condemn Jesus as a sinner, he refuses and states that Jesus must be “from God.” When he finally meets Jesus again, the man accepts Jesus’ self-identification as the “Son of Man”—in John’s Gospel a glorious figure. Note the man’s journey in coming to see who Jesus really is: first a man, then a prophet and someone from God, and finally the glorious Son of Man.

The blind man’s progress in spiritual sight is paralleled by the opponents’ descent into spiritual blindness. While their inquiry starts quite objectively, their understanding of Jesus becomes increasingly hazy. First they insist that Jesus must be a sinner because he broke the Sabbath. Then they dismiss the man’s claim that Jesus is from God. Finally, in their own encounter with Jesus, they fail to recognize their spiritual blindness and sinfulness in rejecting Jesus as the revealer and revelation of God.

Through several rounds of conversations the man born blind comes to see Jesus as he is, while the “spiritual leaders” of the people fall into even greater spiritual blindness. Many interpreters find in this story a sketch of the history of the Johannine community in its efforts to clarify their own understanding of Jesus and in their struggles within first-century Judaism. But it also presents lessons for us today as individuals and as a community of faith.

The blind man’s progress in spiritual sight reminds us that we need God’s grace and revelation to move toward sharper spiritual vision. This point is illustrated by the prophet Samuel’s efforts (today’s first reading) to identify God’s anointed among the sons of Jesse and his final recognition of David as the one chosen by God. Likewise, the opponents’ descent into greater spiritual blindness warns us that if we think we already know all about Jesus, we may be blinding ourselves to the many surprising features of Jesus’ person and fail to see in him the glory of God.

Today’s reading from the Letter to the Ephesians ends with what seems to be a quotation from an early Christian baptismal hymn: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.” The exhortation that precedes it concerns living as “children of light” insofar as “light” produces goodness, righteousness and truth.

In a few weeks, at the Easter Vigil, the celebrant will intone “Light of Christ” three times as a summary of the Easter message. The hope is that we will let Christ be our light, live out of the power of Jesus’ resurrection, see things more clearly and act more appropriately, having “no part in the fruitless works of darkness.” A good prayer for the remaining days of Lent is to ask God to help us see Christ more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly.

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