

A revived homily from 2017 by Father Patrick Ryan, SJ

A good friend of my mother's went blind towards the end of her life; my mother—who was becoming more and more deaf in her latter years—remarked that her friend was more cheerful than my mother sometimes was because she could still hear well, even in a large group. Those who wear hearing aids know how hard it is to hear conversations in a large group, although one-on-one conversations with hearing aids seem to work fairly well. All of this reminds me that I should probably book an appointment with my ophthalmologist and another one with an ear, nose and throat doctor.

The 84-year-old novelist and journalist, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, better known as V.S. Naipaul, was born of Indian parentage in the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago about two years before Ved Mehta, the polymath social commentator and essayist, was born of Indian parentage in Lahore in what was then British India and is now Pakistan. Both of them have been lionized in times past in the New York cocktail party circuit, and even the slightest familiarity with their work should help the casual observer to distinguish them. Ved Mehta has been blind since his childhood and has written extensively about his own life; Naipaul is distinctly sighted. Both can be quite tart-tongued, I am told, but I have met neither.

Some years ago in New York, however, one habitué of the cocktail party universe managed to mix the two up. Looking at V. S. Naipaul gazing in his direction, the careless observer declared that he did not believe that Ved Mehta was really blind. Under the influence of the accompaniment to the canapés, the skeptic began to make funny faces in the general direction of V. S. Naipaul. One can only imagine the clown's chagrin the next morning when someone explained to him his gaffe.

The sighted often feel embarrassed when first dealing with blind people. When bidding farewell, should one say things like, "See you next week"? On meeting in New York quite by accident a blind lawyer whom I had known many years earlier when he was an undergraduate, I paused before saying, "Good to see you again." As we get to know the blind, however, such embarrassments pass, and I know blind people who commonly use the word "see" to indicate an encounter more auditory and tactile.

While the synoptic Gospels tell several stories of encounters between Jesus and blind people, the evangelist John rolls them all together into one magnificent drama, the Gospel reading for this *Laetare* ("Rejoice!") or Fourth Sunday in Lent. This reading directs us toward the ultimate enlightenment—the ultimate opening of our eyes to the light of God—in the Christian liturgical tradition, the Easter celebration of light and word and baptism and Eucharist. There seems little doubt that John's narrative was affected by baptismal practice in the community of the Beloved Disciple. Notice how words about light or enlightenment, about anointing or christening, about washing and baptism come up in today's Gospel narrative.

The man born blind was anointed with mud made from the saliva of Jesus and clay before being told to "wash in the Pool of Siloam," a name interpreted as one who has been "sent." The restoration of the man's sight consequent on these actions did not bring him unadulterated joy. Queried by his doubting neighbors (relatives of the cocktail party skeptic who thought he was looking at Ved Mehta rather than V.S. Naipaul), who wondered if this was the same blind beggar they used to know, the man went on to experience persecution by the Pharisees and at least

partial abandonment by his own parents on the day he first saw them: “Ask him, he is of age, question him.” Imagine that on the first day your son can actually see you, his parents, after years of blindness. “Thanks, Mom and Dad.”

The excommunication of Jewish Christians from the synagogue communities of the Middle East after AD 85 colors the account of the altercation between the newly sighted man and the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. What has sometimes been called the anti-Semitism of John’s Gospel may rather reflect the inner-Jewish struggles of those late first-century Jews who accepted Jesus as Lord and Messiah and those who did not. Any victim of persecutions—religious, racial or those based on gender or disabilities—can understand the rising frustration of the former blind man as his interrogations continued: “Why do you want to hear it all over again? Do not tell me you want to become his disciple too?”

“With that they threw him out bodily.” Anointing with mud began a process of downward mobility for the man born blind, reduction from beggary to the status of an outcast. Precisely in this abasement he came to an insight into Jesus beyond mere physical vision: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” Previously, the man born blind had accepted Jesus as a healer, a prophet, a just man, someone who came “from God.” Now face to face with Jesus, seeing him for the first time, the newly sighted man was asked to affirm his faith in the humanity and the divinity of the one who came from God. The community of the Beloved Disciple was familiar with those who questioned the flesh-and-blood reality of Jesus (1 Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 7). A spiritual version of Jesus, Jesus made into a principle or a manifestation of God, appealed in ancient times to those embarrassed by the Gospel portrait of one who smeared saliva and clay on the eyes of a man born blind.

If the anointing with mud and bathing in Siloam of the man born blind directs our attention forward to the Paschal celebration of baptism, his ejection from Pharisee society foreshadows the repudiation of Jesus by the religious elite of Jerusalem. Jesus spoke to all who would suffer persecution for their faith in Him, from first-century Palestine and Rome to 20th-century China, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Sudan. “I came into the world to divide it, to make the sightless see and the seeing blind.” The man born blind is our contemporary, persecuted Christians anywhere. Let us reach out and welcome him into our community.