

1 Samuel 16. 1 – 13

John 9. 1 – 41

Fr Alex

Lent in Year A of the three-year lectionary is the season of long readings from St John, as you've probably noticed. And one thing that really jumps out at us every week, is John's use of the imagery of darkness and light.

Two weeks ago we heard the story of Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus "by night," and cannot understand what Jesus is saying to him.

Last week we heard of the Samaritan woman at the well, who meets Jesus in the day time – at noon, in fact, the middle of the day – and she sees who Jesus is: the Saviour of the world.

If we haven't already noticed this interplay between darkness and light, seeing and failing to see, St John whacks us over the head with it today, in the story of the healing of the man born blind.

Jesus says, "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." And to prove it, he miraculously heals the man and restores his sight.

And then we have this back and forth between the healed man and the crowd; "He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?'" "Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight," and the poor man is questioned again, relentlessly.

They even bring his parents out and start firing off questions at them! It's almost comical, the amount of questions that are asked in these few verses.

After a final round of interrogation, the man is driven out by the infuriated Pharisees. And what does Jesus do at this point? Does he give him a break? No, he asks him yet another question! But this question has a crucial difference.

The crowd and the Pharisees have been asking questions about the outward, physical sign: "How were your eyes opened?" "How [do you] now see?" "What did he do to you?" "How did he open your eyes?"

But the question that Jesus asks is not about that: his question is about the inward, spiritual sign: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Being blind or having sight; in a sense that's just surface detail. What about the contents of your heart?

We heard the same thing in our first reading, when Samuel is trying to discern who God has chosen to be king. God says, "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Jesus' question and its answer reveal that Jesus hasn't just opened the man's eyes; he has opened his heart too. When Jesus tells the man who he is, like the Samaritan woman the man believes; and he worships him.

And in this encounter everything is turned upside down: the blind man, who everyone thought was sinful and separated from God because of his affliction, is revealed to be the one in whom "God's works are revealed"; and those who could see, who considered themselves righteous and blameless, are revealed to be spiritually blind, fumbling around in the darkness of their own sinfulness.

And worse, they persist in their blindness, despite having come into the presence of the one who is "the light of the world." As the old joke goes, they are like the blind man in the dark room looking for the black cat... that isn't there.

They have an incurable type of blindness, because they think they can see. So Jesus reveals to them the devastating truth: "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

In other words, "if only you understood that you were born spiritually blind, and that you were sinners like everybody else, then like this beggar you would not be imprisoned by the guilt of your sin; the light could open your eyes and take away your sin. But now that you say 'We see,' your sin remains."

These religious leaders are so focussed on the outward, physical sign – the physical blindness, which to them can only be connected with sinfulness – that they have blinded themselves to the one thing that truly matters: the inward, spiritual transformation that comes from an encounter with Jesus, the light of the world.

But the truth is, if we're honest, we can't really be too hard on the Pharisees, at least not in this. Because it's all too easy to fall into the same trap; to focus on what looks like the obvious sinfulness of others, while turning a blind eye to what's going on inside our own hearts.

That, I think, is one of the challenges of today's Gospel. "Surely *we* are not blind, are we?"

Through Lent some of us have been reading Scott Hahn's *The Lamb's Supper*, and he has something to say about this very thing. He talks about the great battle that we are engaged in, as soldiers of the light, fighting against the darkness. But where is the battleground? Surely it's out in the world, against the obvious sinfulness of oppressors and abusers and warmongers?

In fact, he says, "the battle goes on, and we have enlisted for active duty. We must, however, begin the fighting very close to home. Our most dangerous enemies are those we'll find in our own soul: pride, envy, laziness, gluttony, greed, anger, and lust. Before we can advance on our enemies at large, we need to identify our own sinful habits and begin to root them out. All the while, we need to grow in the wisdom and virtue that make us more like Christ.

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These are the tough battles. Maybe they're not as romantic as sabres clashing in a faraway desert, or marching through tear gas to protest injustice. But because they're so perfectly hidden, so *interior*, they require greater heroism."

No one will know the true contents of your heart, how well you fight these great, inward battles; no one will hold you to account – no one, of course, except God.

This spiritual warfare, of course, is what Lent is all about. And it could begin to feel a bit lonely and discouraging, after four weeks, if we were left to fight on our own.

But we're not. In the midst of all this, we are encouraged to *rejoice* on this Mothering Sunday, this Refreshment Sunday. Because we're not left alone to fight these interior battles; Jesus gave us the gift of our Mother the Church, to nurture us; to teach us how to grow our heart to be like that of Christ; to help us open our eyes to his light and to shine with that light to others.

And he gives us the Church to console us; to show us God's forgiveness, when we don't quite get it right. And, most of all, he gives us the Church to keep bringing us into his presence, into his marvellous light, through Word and Sacrament; and to experience again the transformation that comes from an encounter with him.

May we fight bravely in these final weeks of Lent to open our hearts to him who can transform any situation, no matter how dark and shameful we might think it is. And may we rejoice today on this Mothering Sunday, to know ourselves held and nurtured and encouraged by our membership of the Church Christ gave to us. Amen.