The Time of Recognition

March 22nd, 2020

4th Week of Lent

In the novel *Blindness* by Jose Saramago, a modern city is stricken with a plague of blindness. Ironically, one woman who was blind can now see. Throughout the novel, a band of friends try to survive the ravages of a lockdown and then the violence of thugs. The reader quickly begins to see that the real plague consists of the way human beings think and behave (cf. Mark 7:14-23). In the end, they manage to escape from prison and regain their sight. One of them walks into a church, only to discover that during the plague, someone had painted over the eyes of all the saints and angels in the icons and paintings. Imagine that—a sanctuary of blind saints, apostle, and angels—a blind Christ. The secular writer here voices the sentiment of the secular world—God and His believers are indeed blind, blinder than the rest of humanity. Or perhaps it is a commentary on a Church that had forgotten its mission of healing in the world. It is a haunting moment in a haunting novel. In the gospel reading for today, we find timely wisdom to help us weather our current storm and to answer this haunting image from the novel. Jesus heals a blind man by putting mud on his eyes and telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:1-12). The healing leads to the formerly blind man being ostracized by the teachers of the law (John 9:24-35).

The man who has been healed is put on trial because the miracle fell on the Sabbath: “They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’” (John 9:13-17). There is nothing surprising here. This was a constant irritant in the ministry of Jesus. The scribes would accuse him of violating worship, of upholding the wrong message, of being a sinner—all because he wanted to heal. The gospel of Mark, thought by some to be the oldest gospel, depicts a striking contrast between the healing ministry of Jesus and the accusatory resistance from friends, family, and authorities. In the synagogue, he asks the scribes: “‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’” (Mark 3:4). This question is worthy of consideration today. It is a difficult thing to have to close our sanctuary and church. For some, it looks like defeat in the face of the Enemy. Yet, Jesus tells the teachers of the Law that the entire purpose of worship and communing with God is to bring healing to the world. At all times, this healing is spiritual. And sometimes, this healing is physical, as we see in the case of our blind man today. One cannot love neighbours or share spiritual healing if one has no regard for their physical well-being, for God made both the body and the soul.

Our theology can sometimes blind us to the reality of revelation and the reality of everyday life. There is both an otherworldly and worldly aspect to the gospel ministry; remember that Jesus fed the hungry, healed lepers, and looked after the welfare of his own apostles. Though the apostle Paul had lived through numerous misadventures and taught us to “walk by faith, and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7), he nevertheless encouraged the sailors and prisoners to eat before a shipwreck, knowing that their bodies needed energy for the swim to shore once the vessel broke up: “Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, ‘Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.’ After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.) After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea” (Acts 27:33-38). Paul knew God was in control; he had been given a vision of it; but he also knew that God gave us responsibilities to care for one another, and he knew that part of loving the people he was serving was to make sure they were ready for the crisis. Quarantine seems challenging enough for us—but being trapped inside a storm-tossed ship for weeks sounds absolutely miserable. The irony of fasting on a grain ship should not be missed, nor the fact that survival depended both on consuming some food, but also of jettisoning the wheat. Safety and healing require certain protocols depending on the situation. It may mean doing something you were not ready to do (eating food when you are seasick); it may mean giving up something (losing the wheat and the profits it would have brought the shipping company). Nevertheless, Paul brilliantly combines the demands of the time with the gift from the timeless—the meal resembles communion: “After he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat” (Acts 27:35). One of the greatest medicines for our souls today is to give thanks to God for what we have in the presence of all, and to invite them into our communion through sharing our hope and sharing encouragement, even if it is not in the usual manner. And we will not be the first Christians to have had services disrupted. Imagine what the apostles went through—arrests, exile, shipwrecks, plagues, earthquakes, natural disasters—the New Testament and early Christian literature is filled with such moments. Were the apostles to appear in our society today, they might think that our stable, routine manner of worship is not normal. They had no such stability. The Ethiopian was baptized by Philip at an oasis in the desert—(Acts 8:26-40); Paul and Silas sang hymns in their jail (Acts 16:16-40). Our new normal today would not necessarily have surprised any of the apostles or their contemporaries. Life in the Holy Spirit was full of the unexpected. In our story today, we also learn that healing can look unexpectedly unusual. Jesus put mud on the blind man’s eyes and told him to wash in the pool of Siloam (John 9:6-7). This was not standard medical practice, not even in the first century. When you look at some of the other miracles, they get even weirder. When healing a deaf mute, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears, spat, and touched his tongue, looked to heaven and said: “Be opened!” (Mark 7:33-35). At other times, he merely touched the person (Mark 1:41) or spoke a word (Mark 7:29). It may be a bit of a theological stretch, but perhaps the scripture is teaching us that healing and worship can take on different forms and look different from what we expect. Nevertheless, things like social distancing, good hygiene, special diets, disinfecting homes, distinguishing serious symptoms from less serious symptoms, and even quarantine are not new, nor are they secular. Every one of those things is found, in some form, in the Law of Moses. Our God is a God of the miraculous and the scientific, the mystical and the mundane.

Our theology can also blind us from seeing Jesus. And yet, the gospel is very matter of fact. John says he wrote the gospel, “so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In other words, an encounter with the gospel should be a time of recognition. Of recognizing that we have been spiritually blind, but through the gospel, now we can see. What is it that we see in Jesus that should make us believe? Jesus said, “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). Throughout the gospels, one of the strongest markers of divinity in the ministry of Jesus is the fact that it brought goodness and healing to people. That was the real scandal. That this poor itinerant healer did indeed bring revival and hope in a way that the ordinary prescriptions of law, ritual, and temple could not bring. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is beleaguered by constant accusation, but the facts continue to speak for themselves from one pericope to the next: “They crossed the lake and came to land at Genessaret, where they tied up the boat. As they left the boat, people recognized Jesus at once. So they ran throughout the whole region and brought the sick lying on their mats to him, wherever they heard he was. And everywhere Jesus went, to villages, towns, or farms, people would take their sick to the market places and beg him to let the sick at least touch the edge of his cloak; and all who touched it were made well” (Mark 6:53-56). Not only was Jesus recognized by face—he was recognized as one who brought healing. Even in our text today, the once blind man offers this inarguable fact: “‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’” (John 9: 25). The resurrection is indeed the greatest miracle in the life of Jesus, and the early Christians went to their deaths believing in it to the very end. Nevertheless, I believe there was a reason that people were willing to believe something that incredible—because they already knew that Jesus was renowned as a great healer, that his presence brought goodness. It was because of the way he healed that contributed to his trial and execution on a cross. Had he not been renowned as a healer, he would have posed no threat to the establishment, and perhaps the resurrection story would have vanished into oblivion or the realm of old wives’ tales and legends.

The exchange between the once blind man and Jesus at the end of the pericope seems like an appropriate response to the image of the church with its blinded saints, apostles and angels: “Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’” (John 9:35-39). Let us not become blind, but recognize that there is indeed healing in the presence of Jesus, even when it seems to come in ways that defy our comfortable theology or philosophy. And let us likewise become known as healers, even if healing today means inaction at home. This will save many lives, and we should always be busy with the work of salvation, both temporary and eternal. Our salvation is in Jesus, the Great Physician, who knew that bodies need care just as our spirits need it. And though one kind of worship may be disrupted, let us worship without ceasing, lifting high the Holy Name of our hope, our faith, our love, courageously taking part in the healing of our province by embracing this season of distance without giving up words of encouragement, words of prayer, words and gestures that heal.