

April 3, 2011 - Fourth Sunday of Lent (A)

Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Cycle A):

1. 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a (David is anointed as king of Israel.)
Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6 Response: "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want."
2. Ephesians 5:8-14 (Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.)
3. John 9:1-41 (longer form); John 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-38 (shorter form) (Jesus heals the man born blind.)

Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Reading by Bill Hunt

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In this Sunday's Gospel John the Evangelist weaves a meditation around the story of Jesus' healing of a man born blind. All the Gospels have accounts of Jesus' healing of blind people. John, however, is also interested in the deeper meaning of this sign. He makes it into a parable of progress toward baptismal faith. Thus, it is very fitting for the season of Lent when the church prepares for baptism of the catechumens at the Easter Vigil service.

Raymond Brown summarizes the passage well. "This is a story of how a man who sat in darkness was brought to see the light, not only physically but spiritually. On the other hand, it is also a tale of how those who thought they saw (the Pharisees) were blinding themselves to the light and plunging into darkness. The story starts in verse 1 with a blind man who will gain his sight; it ends in vs. 41 with the Pharisees who have become spiritually blind." (Brown 1966, 377)

The healing of the man born blind has many similarities with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, which we listened to last Sunday. Neither the woman nor the man has a name. Could it be that they are everywoman and everyman figures? The early Jesus movement within Judaism saw baptism as a new creation. The baptized became new men and new women. It appears that in the Johannine community female believers were addressed as "woman." Perhaps, males were addressed as "man." (See Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 100.) This appears to refer to the account in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3. Before the sin in the garden the two creatures have no proper names. They are referred to simply as "the man/the husband" (Hebrew: ha adam or ha ish) and as "the woman/the wife" (Hebrew: ha isshah). In other words, it seems that John's community believed that baptism restored people to primordial innocence.

There are other similarities. Both the Samaritan woman and the blind man are born into a sinful state. Ancient Israelites considered intermarriage with pagans to be a sin, and ancient Mediterranean people in general saw misfortune to be the result of somebody's sin. The turning point for both the woman and the man in their journey to faith is recognition of Jesus as a prophet, one who can read people's minds and knows their innermost secrets (the Samaritan woman), and one who performs healings (the man born blind).

Perhaps the most striking similarity is that the central message of both stories is a revelation of who Jesus is. In the story of the woman the protagonists go from inter-religious and inter-ethnic hostility to recognition of Jesus as the Savior of the World. In this story the man goes from blindness to faith in Jesus as the Judge of the World (the Son of Man). (1) In each case the reader/listener is drawn into the action of the story and invited to affirm the faith of the Johannine community.

To understand John's story it is important to know how first century Mediterranean people understood light and darkness, sight and blindness. Light was a kind of stuff that spread everywhere. Darkness was a kind of stuff, too. It was not merely absence of light, as we understand it. For those people darkness had a dynamic of its own. For example, in the prologue of John's Gospel light and darkness are portrayed as competing forces. (John 1.5)

Light was associated with life. (See Job 33.30; Psalm 56.13.) "When Jesus says he is the 'light of the world,' he is saying both that he enables Israel to see the way things actually are and that he is likewise the source of Israel's life." (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998, 170)

For people of that time, sight occurred when the fire in one's heart shone out through one's eyes into the world. If one's eye was good, one cast light into the world. If one's eye was evil, one cast darkness from one's heart into the world. The evil eye was like a ray that could do damage to the person who was not wary.

Since a blind person's heart was completely dark, she or he could only project darkness and, therefore, could not see. Many suspected blind people of having the evil eye and avoided meeting their gaze. (See Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998, 170.) It is only a short step from there to seeing blindness as associated with darkness and sin. This also explains the use of blindness as a metaphor for sin in the conclusion of this story.

This partly explains why the blind man's parents were so reluctant to get involved in the controversy. Acknowledging that he was their son would cause many of their neighbors to believe that it was their sin that had caused his blindness. The Pharisees in the story eventually draw this conclusion when they say to the man, "You were born totally in sin." (v. 34)

Jesus cuts through all this by saying, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him." We would do well to imitate this approach. Rather than cursing the darkness or trying to assign blame for the world's problems, we should see them as challenges to give glory to God by working for healing and reconciliation.

There are far too many themes in this passage to consider all of them in a brief reflection. I would like to concentrate on John the Evangelist's description of the sign Jesus performed. (For a perceptive exposition of four other themes see Brueggemann et al. 1995, 216-217.)

. . . he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared [literally "anointed"] the clay on his eyes, and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam"--which means Sent--. So he went and washed, and came back able to see. (John 9.6-7)

This is a typical description of the work of a folk healer as opposed to that of a physician. Ancient physicians took a philosophical approach to sickness. "They studied the behavior of sick people, their symptoms and complaints, and developed theories to explain sickness. They never touched, handled, cut, or otherwise physically ministered to the sick. To this end they used slaves. Should the sick person die, the slave was killed--not the physician." (Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998, 170, 175)

In Jesus' time there was widespread belief that saliva was a protection from the evil eye that the blind man was thought to possess. This might account for Jesus' use of his saliva to make the clay with which he "anointed" the blind man's eyes. (See Malina & Rorbaugh 1998, 170).

Genesis 2.7 is also in the background. "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground" Just as Jesus is the light of the world, which prevails in the conflict with darkness (John 1.5; Genesis 1.3-5), so also Jesus is the creator of the new human being.

It is interesting that a Syriac translation of Tatian's Diatesseron (a second century conflation of the four gospels into one) reads: "and he made eyes from his clay." (See Aland et al. 1966, 362, note 3 on verse 6.) The Syrian writer envisioned Jesus as molding new clay eyes for the blind man and breathing life into them.

The language of John's Gospel is also arresting. He says that Jesus "anointed (Greek: *epéchrisein*) the clay on his eyes" This is probably a reading back into the story of the baptismal language of John's community. The explanation of why the blind man's parents were hesitant to say anything about the healing for fear that they would be expelled from the

synagogue community is a similar reading of the conflict between the followers of the Pharisees and the Johannine community back into the time of Jesus.

The baptismal imagery continues when Jesus tells the blind man, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam"--which means Sent--." Like Elisha's cure of Naaman the Syrian (2 Kings 5.10-13), Jesus does not heal the man on the spot. The healing occurs after he washes in the pool named "Sent." Although the etymology is questionable at best, in John's Gospel Jesus is repeatedly referred to as the one who has been sent by the Father. (See, for example, John 3.17; 5.36; 6.29; 7.16; 8.16; 9.4; 10.36; 11.42; 12.44; 13.20; 14.24; 15.21; 16.5; 17.8; 20.21; etc.) For John "Sent" is almost another personal name for Jesus.

Baptismal imagery, then, is one of the keys to understanding John's story of Jesus' cure of the man born blind. For John, the event is a sign of deeper realities that can only be understood through faith in Jesus. For believers baptism involves immersion into Jesus with the result that our eyes are opened to see who Jesus really is, the Judge of the World.

During Lent we are invited to renew that belief.

Footnote

(1) Judgment is a biblical concept that modern readers find hard to understand. In the biblical sense judgment is primarily related to seeing and honor, and only secondarily to reward and punishment. Judgment, like honor, is public. It means that all people see things as they really are. It is especially a public vindication of God's honor. At the last judgment those who have suffered for their faith, as well as their persecutors, will see that all along God had acted wisely and justly. To proclaim Jesus as "the Human One" (Son of Man) or "the one who is to come" (i.e. on the clouds of heaven [See Daniel 7.113.]) is to say that the suffering and risen Jesus is the key to understanding that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, all of God's ways are just and right.

In preparing these reflections, in addition to the biblical texts, I consulted the following works:

Aland et al. 1966 - Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Bruce M. Metzger, and Allen Wikgren, Eds., *The Greek New Testament* (New York: American Bible Society, 1966), p. 362.

Brown 1966 - Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel according to John* (i-xii) , Volume 29 of the *Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), pp. 369-382.

Brueggemann et al. 1995 - Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James

D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRS, Year A*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp. 209-217.

Fuller 1984 - Reginald H. Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary. The Word of God for the Church Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1984), pp. 48-49.

Malina & Rohrbaugh 1998 - Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 168-178.

Moloney 1998 – Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B. *The Gospel of John. Sacra Pagina Series Volume 4, A Michael Glazier Book* (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press 1998), pp. 289-302, 308.

Pilch 1995 - John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A. A Liturgical Press Book* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 58-60.