

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year A

March 19, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a (Samuel anoints David in the midst of his brothers.)

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.)

Second Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14 (Live as children of light.)

Gospel: John 9:1-41 (The man born blind.)

In all of today's readings, physical sight serves as a metaphor for enlightenment. The Prophet Samuel must see *as God sees*, not as people see, in order to recognize David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, as the one chosen to rule over Israel. The logical choice is Eliab. Not only is he the eldest, but he also carries himself with regal bearing. However, the Lord rejects him, as well as all six of his brothers. Instead, God chooses David, whom no one thought significant enough even to invite him to the banquet. The narrator notes that David "was handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance," not unlike his older brothers. That's what all the people at the banquet could see in David. Only God could look into the heart of the future King and see the Shepherd whom Israel needed to lead them in the ways of righteousness.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul reminds converts to the Christian faith that they were once darkness, but now have been called to live as children of light, producing every kind of goodness, and welcoming the scrutiny that sinners dread, but righteous people never fear. Note that Paul does *not* say that they once "*lived in* darkness, but now live in the light of Christ," as if the light is something external to them. His message is far more radical: "*You were* once darkness, but now you *are* light in the Lord." In other words, the light of Christ has not just illuminated their minds, but also entered their hearts to make them a new creation. They have *become* light in the Lord.

Then there is the gospel, the famous story of the man born blind. In John's masterful narrative, one man is given the ability to "see" Jesus as the Christ and to believe in him, while the Pharisees refuse to believe in him and, thus, remain "blind." At first it seems that John is simply recounting another miracle of Jesus. But, even from the opening verses, there are hints of a much deeper meaning to the story. For example, Jesus and his disciples discuss why this man was born blind. Was it a punishment for some grave sin that his parents committed, or perhaps a preemptive punishment for a sin that God knew he would commit in the future? No, says Jesus, this man's blindness is a gift that will allow the works of God to be made visible through him. Jesus calls himself the "light of the world." When this man receives physical sight from Jesus, his miraculous cure and his subsequent testimony will reveal Jesus as the Christ, the one who has come into the world to save people from their sins. The narrative, then, presents a contrast between those who can "see" Jesus and those who cannot, those who welcome the light of Christ and those who reject it.

The Pharisees interrogate the formerly blind man about his cure. Not being satisfied with his answers, they also question his parents, and then question the man a second time.

Every time the details of the man's cure are retold, it becomes more and more obvious that the way Jesus healed him really is not the issue. The Pharisees are just looking for a reason to condemn Jesus. They had already decided among themselves that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue. So, this questioning of witnesses is just a desperate attempt to seek some evidence to support the conclusion that they have already reached. Their minds and hearts are closed to Jesus. Their spiritual blindness is impenetrable. They *will not be enlightened*.

In the course of their deliberations, it is noted that Jesus cured the man on a Sabbath. That detail provides enough of a pretense for *some* Pharisees to label Jesus as a sinner, but others question, "How can a sinful man do such signs?" Perhaps the cure was actually a hoax. But, no, the man's parents affirm that this really is their son, and that he really was born blind. The Pharisees are left with no reason to condemn Jesus, except their preconceived notions about him.

In the end, the cured man professes belief in Jesus and worships him. He truly "sees" Jesus for who he is. The Pharisees, by contrast, refuse to believe. Their blindness remains, not because of any defect in their eyes, but because of the hardness of their hearts.

For centuries, the season of Lent has been considered a time of purification and *enlightenment* for catechumens preparing to receive the Easter sacraments. In more recent times, it has become a spiritual journey for the entire Church. All of us seek the type of enlightenment that we see in the Scripture readings today — not just an *intellectual* awakening, but a *spiritual* one. We pray that our hearts may be opened more fully to the mystery of Jesus, and that we may learn to live in his light. The goal of our Lenten journey is not just greater *understanding*, but greater *love*. And, that goal is achieved by learning to see ourselves, other people, and the world in which we live with the eyes of God.

Let us take St. Paul's words to heart, for he really was speaking to all Christians of all eras when he said, "You are now light in the Lord; live as children of the light." He is not telling us simply to bask in the light of Christ, like the disciples who witnessed his Transfiguration. He's encouraging us to allow Christ's light to penetrate us deeply and transform us from within. And, he is further exhorting us to *radiate* that light to everyone around us, becoming both a public witness to Christ and a source of light for others. He's telling us to root out any darkness that remains in us and in our society, to expose everything that is not pleasing to the Lord and renounce it. That requires a great amount of humility, and also a certain degree of boldness.

Let us not be too cautious, then, about our Lenten resolutions. While it's good to be realistic about our spiritual goals, we shouldn't be too timid. It's very tempting to peer into only one or two dark corners of our life, while leaving the rest unexamined. Then we might congratulate ourselves for the very modest changes that we have made, even if they make little difference in the long run. Perhaps we can look deeper and see greater possibilities. Unlike the Pharisees, who failed to see the grace of God that was staring them right in the face, let us invite Christ and his light to make a *real difference* in our lives. Let us *become light* in the Lord.