

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 19, 2023

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministries and School Chaplain*

on

Mathew 5:1-12

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‘The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision’.

-Helen Keller

To be without sight - temporarily, suddenly, or permanently from birth – means that a person will experience the world in a new way: physical, emotional, and even spiritual. Helen Keller, born in Alabama in 1880, and who lost her sight and her hearing as a result of a childhood illness, refused to give in to her long struggles to communicate, and went on to become an author, disability rights advocate, political activist, and lecturer. Among her many profound and famous sayings, she said, *‘The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision’*.

Keller, as with many famous artists, composers, hymn-writers, organists, politicians, inventors without sight, refused to accept that her disability was what defined her entire life. She also said, *‘The chief handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the attitude of seeing people towards them.’* This is still the experience of many who are disabled, whose lives are defined by what they cannot do, rather than by what they *can* do.

In today’s Gospel reading, we encounter a man marginalized by society and religion. His physical blindness defined his whole life at every level. Not only was he an outsider because he was blind, he encountered judgments and assumptions about the cause of his blindness. The man encountered religious leaders whose superior, self-righteous, and legalistic attitudes to the letter of the law made them dismissive of anyone one who did not interpret things their way. Without sight, he could never hope to gain a valued place in society, and so he needed to beg, and wait...wait and beg, while others barely saw him and passed him by. In this healing, Jesus not only made the man whole, he also exposed the hypocrisy of those whose own prejudice made *them*, in reality, the disabled ones.

The Fourth Gospel is unlike the three synoptic Gospels, and the miracles in that Gospel are described as **signs** by which God’s glory is revealed. Jesus opened the man’s eyes in a curious way; Jesus spat on the ground, and made mud from clay and saliva, anointed the man’s eyes, and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Theologians have a word to describe the significance of this kind of action - ***Theandric Action*** – from the two Greek words for ‘God’

and ‘Man,’ and in which Jesus shows the cooperation of the divine with the earthly. These familiar powerful elements of earth, clay, and water evoke our recollection of the very dust of the ground from which we were created, and to which we have returned to regularly during our Lenten journey. Jesus initiated the healing with the very same dust of the ground from which God created Adam, whose name in Hebrew simply means ‘earth.’

It is extraordinary that there is such an absence of celebration or wonder at this miracle. Instead, the religious leaders and even the disciples of Jesus became preoccupied and distracted, with their bickering over interpretations and attitudes to the law. Their observance of Sabbath Law in particular was a stumbling block for them; they failed to see Jesus as the healer, the Word made flesh, the light of the world in their midst. Instead, they dismissed the miracle and described Jesus as a sinner. But, in John’s Gospel, miracles are *signs* or pointers to something even more powerful.

Do we also get bogged down or preoccupied with matters of faith, ritual, or tradition, and in so doing fail to see the bigger picture of God’s creativity at work around us? Do we miss the miraculous that is given to us as a sign of God’s glory because of our own limited sight? In today’s gospel reading, Jesus illuminated the unhelpful attitudes of established religious teaching on sin and suffering in the way that he relates to, heals, and then acknowledges our central character who can now see. Jesus invites us to do the same.

Pope Francis, preaching on this same Gospel, suggested that the story of the blind man cured by Jesus is our story too. It is so easy to become like the scribes and the pharisees who are blind to God’s mercy. He said, *“From the heights of our pride we judge others, even the Lord. Today, we are invited to open ourselves to Christ’s light, so that our lives might bear fruit; to eliminate our behavior that is not Christian... We must repent of this, and eliminate these forms of behavior ... to behave like ‘children of light’, with humility, patience and mercy.”*¹

Jesus invites us ‘to open our eyes’ and to respond with love whenever we discover prejudice or injustice; for it is justice, and it is love that illuminates the darkness, offering true healing. We are invited to examine our lives against Jesus’ own standard of love, perhaps starting with how we respond to those whose abilities or life-style seems different to our own. As St. Paul said, *“Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.”*

For example, do we fail to see and respond to the injustice of modern slavery around the world, ignoring human trafficking on our own doorstep? Do we take our part in ensuring all God’s children, young people, and vulnerable adults are included, loved, and protected? Or do we remain in the dark, and ignore conversations that make us uncomfortable?

Just before the Gospel reading, we sang the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ written by John Newton, which is a testimony to his own conversion. Newton recognized his smallness before God, and allowed the light of Christ to illumine those wrongful attitudes and undignified actions which he justified for his own purposes, which in his case had been a commitment to slavery. His life

was turned around from ways of darkness to the very light in which we, too, are called to participate.

As we approach the light of Easter, God is inviting us to set aside the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light, that we might know and say with Newton, *“I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”*

The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.

¹ *Homily preached in Rome on March 31, 2014.*