

Seeing Light, Believing Truth

John 9:1-13, 28-41

March 2, 2008

I.

What did I ever do to deserve this? Lord, why is this happening to me? We all probably have asked those questions at one time or another.

Those types of thoughts reflect the question that Jesus' disciples asked him at the beginning of today's Gospel reading. As they were walking along they saw a man blind from birth, and the disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

It's interesting to note that the disciples' question does not exhibit much compassion for the man's plight, does it? Instead, they were more concerned about how sin could cause afflictions. And implicit in their question was the idea that not only had someone sinned, but also that God had punished that sin by causing blindness.

This was a common belief in Jewish culture at the time. It's based on the ancient law of Moses summarized in the Book of Numbers that says, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation" (14:18). That same idea is repeated in Exodus (20:5, 34:7) and Deuteronomy (5:9).

Because Jews of the first century lived under brutal Roman oppression, it might have been natural for them to wonder if God was more wrathful than loving. Perhaps they thought that God was just waiting for them to make a mistake so he could zap them. A contemporary image might have God watching us at his monitor with his finger hovering over the "smite" button.

But that isn't the way it works. Even the law of Moses I just quoted begins by saying, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin." This could seem to mean that sins can be forgiven, and that punishment is reserved for those who do not come to him to seek forgiveness.

God's forgiveness also was taught in Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah's suffering. Isaiah said, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (53:5).

II.

With that introduction to set the stage, let's look at Jesus' response to the disciples' question. He rejected both alternatives, that either the man or his parents had sinned, and he spoke of a third option. He basically said that the man's blindness was not caused by anyone's sin, and instead it would enable him to reveal God's mercy and compassion through restoring his sight.

He also said that his healing work was God's work, and that he was able to do it because he was the light of the world. This reiterated Jesus' statement a few verses earlier in John's Gospel where he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12).

So our reading tells us that even though there is suffering in the world, Jesus came to redeem that suffering and bring light to the darkness. And through other parts of Scripture we know that he is with us today, through the Holy Spirit, to guide and comfort us in difficult times.

This reminds me of a sign I saw on the back of a bulldozer parked along a highway that had frequent traffic jams because of all the road work being done. The sign said "The Road to Happiness is Always Under Construction."

That really seems to be true, doesn't it? Bumps in the road are part of life. I have said before that we live in a broken world, and therefore broken things happen. We also could say that the world is under construction. It is not yet finished. God's kingdom is not yet here. There still are things that need to be fixed. And until they are fixed there will be trials, tribulations, and difficulties.

Jesus, through his healing miracles, gave us a preview of this future completed world where things no longer will be broken. He pulled aside the curtain and briefly showed us what the kingdom will be like. Even though the previews were real, the main attraction is still to come.

This raises two questions. For many people it can be difficult to understand how an all-powerful and good God can allow bad things to happen. This might lead to speculation that God is not all-powerful, or is not all good. It can be difficult to live a life of faith in the face of doubts like those.

The second question can be asked by those who are willing to accept the world the way it is without doubting God, but still want guidance in dealing with that world. What am I supposed to do in the meantime? How do I live my life while waiting for a glorious second coming that probably is beyond my lifetime?

We can consider these two questions in the context of today's Gospel. Jesus redeemed the blind man's affliction by physically healing him. And he told the Pharisees that although they could see, they were spiritually blind. We can apply these lessons to our own lives by knowing that Jesus will heal us, sometimes physically and always spiritually.

III.

But even though we know Jesus is with us, we do not know how to completely explain the problems of evil, and pain, and suffering that we see around us. All we know is what has been revealed in Scripture, and what we might reasonably deduce from those revelations.

The traditional view, and you probably have heard this before, is that Satan, not God, is responsible. Satan was a fallen angel who originally was created good, but rebelled against God and spread that rebellion to the world. Then Satan caused the fall of humanity when Adam and Eve were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit.

As a result, humanity, which was created good, became imperfect and disposed to sin. The world, which was created good, became imperfect and broken. God is working to fix the world and bring people back to him, and his offer of salvation through Jesus Christ is the way it will happen. But a day to God is a thousand years to us, and for us the process seems slow even though it will happen in God's time.

Contemporary scholars have come up with new theories that I'm not going to describe today, but they don't offer any startling new revelations. Even though there might be theological disagreements on how our present worldly state of affairs came to pass, it's clear that the promise of God's kingdom means that good things will happen to good people.

But until the kingdom arrives, the brokenness of the world today means that bad things also can befall good people just as the blind man in today's Gospel was afflicted, and God is not to blame. And in many cases the bad things that happen are nothing more than the natural consequences of our own bad decisions.

This does not suggest, however, that God is not involved in our lives. God disciplines us in positive ways. He corrects us by leading us to make changes in our lives. He changes us by removing things that are not fruitful in our lives. And he works to keep us faithful to bring glory to himself.

The book of Hebrews says we are to "endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline?" (12:7). It goes on to say that "we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For [our parents] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness" (12:9-10).

These ideas go back to the Old Testament. Proverbs says that we should "not despise the Lord's discipline, for the Lord reproves the one he loves" (3:11-12). Deuteronomy tell us that as a parent disciplines a child, so the Lord disciplines you" (8:5).

But what about times when we do nothing wrong, times where discipline is not an issue? What about the pain and suffering of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps we can understand that although God creates good things, they sometimes can lead to bad things just by the way they work on their own.

Remember the tsunami that killed so many people in Indonesia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka in December 2004. Did God cause that? The answer is no. Even though the story of creation tells us that God created the earth as a good thing, we saw how the earth at times can bring forth tragedy. As the earth's crust cools, the plates under the crust shift and cause earthquakes. And when that happens at sea the tremors generate huge waves that rise up when they come ashore. Until the earth is made new, those types of things occasionally will happen.

And finally what about the things that have no explanation? What about the father and husband taken from us long before his work is finished? Or the young mother with incurable breast cancer? Or the high school honor student who is a victim of random violence? Those are the tough ones, and the answers are not clear. We can only trust that God, in his providence, will redeem those tragedies.

IV.

So what are we supposed to do about this? How do we live in an age where God's kingdom was set in motion by Christ's first coming, but its completion awaits his coming again?

Today's gospel give us some guidance. We can let Jesus open our eyes and keep them open. He is the light of the world and wants us to stand in that light. He wants us to believe that he died to save us from our sins, and he wants us to accept him in that way and live Christian lives.

It's not always easy, especially if we try to do it alone. The church can help. We live in community with each other. Our community can be a source of support for those who need it, and our community can be a focal point to help us carry his work in the world. Certainly, when things happen we can ask "why, Lord?" But we also know that God's time is not yet here, and that some things have not yet been revealed. If we worry too much about "why," then we could ignore the question of "what should I do next, Lord?" That part is our responsibility.

V.

So, if we are experiencing any temporary spiritual blindness, Jesus wants us to confess that to him and ask him to help us see again. If we do have some light and understanding then we are called to walk by that light. And finally, if we find ourselves afflicted or suffering hardship, we can trust in his mercy and compassion to ease our burdens.

Unlike the Pharisees and others who lived two thousand years ago, we are better able to know the truth. And having seen the truth, today's Gospel tells us that we do not have the option of ignoring it. While the world might insist that seeing is believing, for us, for people of faith, it is just the opposite. Believing is seeing. *Amen.*