

## SPG#160, Lent 4A

March 2, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

If you enjoy watching movies, either on the big screen or at home, you know that most movies today, with a few exceptions, are about two hours long. But there have been movies such as “The Ten Commandments” and “Gone With the Wind” that were considered as epic movies. And they ran about four hours with an intermission.

As stories in the New Testament run, today’s story in the gospel of John of the man who was blind from birth is an epic story. It is 41 verses long. The characters in the story all assume more personal characteristics than most other stories in the New Testament.

And in a sermon, any commentary I would offer on the story would be almost superfluous to the telling of the story itself. So that is what I will do.

Questions are raised in John by Jesus’ disciples about why the man born blind had been born that way. They asked if it was because of his own sin or his parents. Jesus explains that the man’s blindness is not about sin, but about God’s works being revealed in him. In this account Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud of the saliva, and spreads it over his eyes. Then he tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When he washed in the pool, then he could see. Then there is recorded an extensive conversation among those who had known the blind man about whether it was really him or not. The man who had been born blind was then taken to the Pharisees, supposedly for questioning to determine who it was who had given him his sight.

In the course of the questioning it is revealed that Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath. This caused some concern among the Pharisees as it seemed to be a violation of observing the Sabbath.

And so they were arguing among themselves that this act of restoring sight must not have been of God because it happened in the midst of a violation of the Sabbath. But others among them were saying, "How can a person who is not of God, who is a sinner, perform such an incredible act?" So they asked the man who was blind, "What do you have to say about this?" And he said, "He is a prophet."

But then the Pharisees doubted that he had been born blind in the first place. And they went to his parents to check this out. His parents said, "Yes, this is our son who was born blind. We do not know how his sight was restored. Go ask him yourself. He is a grown man." So back they went to the man who had been born blind. And they in essence said to him, "Go ahead and admit it. This man, this Jesus, he is a sinner, right? Just go ahead and admit it." At this point the man who was blind exhibits a new and wonderful eloquence. And in one of those classic responses in the New Testament that has been quoted many times, he said, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that I was blind, now I see." But the Pharisees persisted, demanding that he tell them specifically how his sight was restored. But the blind man said, "I have already told you, and you would not listen. Why do you want me to tell it again. Maybe you want to become one of his disciples." Well, at this statement, the reader of the story knows that the Pharisees are enraged. But the writer merely says that the Pharisees reviled him. And the reader is invited to fill in with your own words.

In my own response I was thinking something like, "Listen you formerly blind man. How dare you speak to us this way? We are trained in the law of Moses!"

But the blind man is not intimidated. And he says, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.

Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

But the indignant Pharisees remain indignant. And they drove him out from their presence. The story then moves into the final phase with Jesus hearing the confession of faith of the man born blind, and with Jesus saying, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

The story ends with the Pharisees saying, "Surely you do not mean that we are blind, do you?" And Jesus replies, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

This story has everything. It raises the question of where hardship comes from. "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And then there is the healing itself, where Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud from his saliva and dirt. And then he places the mud on the man's eyes. We might say, "Yuk!" Spit, dirt, mud, on a man's eyes?! Yuk!" But, wait a minute. Who are those people who partake of the body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist? Is that us? So, we are grossed out by saliva and dirt, but not by partaking of the body and blood of Jesus?

And then there is the humorous and sarcastic comment the parents made to the Pharisees, "We do not know how his sight was restored. Go ask him yourself. He is a grown man."

The eloquence, the humor, and the sarcasm of the man born blind, in response to the Pharisees, has a drama all its own. "I do not know who he is, or where he is from. But this I do know. Once I was blind, now I see. Why do you want me to tell you again? Do you want to become one of his disciples?"

And finally there is the paradoxical saying of Jesus at the very end, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

So there is theological reflection, the visceral and astonishing healing of the man born blind, the humor and sarcasm found in the dialogs, the eloquence and profound statements of the man born blind, and the paradoxical saying of Jesus.

So there is a risk in reading this story seriously. You run the risk of being theologically challenged, grossed out, moved to laughter, touched by moving statements, and invited to consider a paradox all at once. The story is unique. But in another sense it is not so unique. For Sunday after Sunday we are theologically challenged. We laugh together. Often we are moved by the touching statement of one of us. Every Sunday we make a confession of faith, as the man born blind did. And often we consider challenging and enigmatic statements out of the scripture. Partaking of the Eucharist is regularized among us. But if it were not so, we would find such things as partaking of body and blood as revolting. And so the story is a picture in words of what we already do. And in both this story and what we say and do in the Eucharist, there is theological challenge. There is physicality and the visceral: body and blood, saliva and dirt. There is the joy of humor. There is the miracle of the presence of Christ.

There is the tug on our hearts caused by a profound sharing. And there is the invitation into spiritual paradox. And it may not seem that way at first because we do it all the time. But in the story and in what we do here in this church, as we laugh, and as we are moved, it is an invitation to, and a provocation to, experience God as mystifying, as visceral, as human. In the story and in what we do here, it is an invitation into the life of Christ. And I put this question before us as students of the scripture. I wonder if this story was some kind of a preparation for the Holy Communion in the early centuries of the church.

We are rather accustomed to the feel and taste of a wafer, and the feel and taste of wine. But I wonder if, in the next few days, if we mixed our saliva with some dirt, and placed some on our closed eyes. I wonder what that would feel like. I wonder what it would feel like to have mud made from the saliva of the Savior on our eyes, enabling us to see beyond our own blindness. It is an interesting thing to wonder about, since we partake of the body and blood of Jesus in the first place.

And I wonder if we will allow ourselves to participate in Christ on that level. Because when God becomes a person, it is not just about some kind of doctrinal statement. It is about wondering and praying and confessing and laughing and being moved. It is about the fluids, moistures, and odors of humanity. It is about the texture of mud made from saliva. It is about the body and blood of Jesus Christ that becomes our body and blood. It is about visceral contact. It is about full participation.

And in that participation we are changed and allowed to see where we had been blind.

We do not know if the man born blind was eloquent and profound before Jesus put his saliva on him. We just know that immediately after the experience he was eloquent and profound. And perhaps nothing he said was more eloquent, or more profound, or more human than, "I do not know if he is a sinner. But this I do know. I was blind. Now I see." Amen.