

The Man Born Blind ~ March 30, 2014

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears,
I hid from Him; and under running laughter
Up vistaed hopes, I sped;
and shot, precipitated
adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
from those strong Feet that followed, followed
after.”

These are the opening words of the nineteenth century poem, *“The Hound of Heaven”* written by Francis Thompson . Here is a poem which tells of one person’s running from the unflinching, loving pursuit of God. All through these lives we live, God pursues us. Years ago, a Jesuit scholar wrote of this poem, “To all who read the history of humankind with unsoiled eyes, the one outstanding and outdistancing fact is the insistent love of God.” [Fr. Francis LeBuffe, S.J. – Professor of Psychology, Fordham U. Graduate School in “An Interpretation of the Hound of Heaven,” 1923.]

God pursues us! God wants to be with us. God is the one who says, “I am the Light of the world; step out of the darkness and into my life.”

Our readings today are lengthy. My remarks, I hope, will not be. We understand the gospel is about “light and darkness; sight vs. blindness.” But the other reality which is present in the story is the developing relationship between the blind man and Jesus.

Fifth Century St. Augustine wrote “The man born blind is more than an individual – he stands for the human race.” This blind man is you and me before we entered into relationship, into life with Christ. If you would, please enter into this blind man’s life with me...for a moment: He is an adult who has been blind since birth. He doesn’t see sky, trees, or any of the wonders of creation. He can’t see people; he doesn’t know color. He is poor, sitting by the side of the road, begging. Every day.

Because when you're poor, and you are living in the darkness of this world, the begging never stops. Do people even notice him anymore? No. This is evidenced by the number of people who comment later, "Isn't this the man who sits by the side of the road? Or maybe it's someone who looks like him."

You know how we can be, we humans. After a while, we don't see people or their circumstances. We pass them by. The poor continue in their dark poverty.

Jesus comes to the blind man first. This is an important theological point: God approaches us first. Jesus is not beckoned; the blind man has not said, "Heal me."

No. Jesus approaches, makes a concoction of mud, puts it on his eyes and instructs the man to go wash in the Pool of Siloam. He goes, is given sight and returns.

But wait! The best part is still to come. Yes, I know being given physical sight is a great thing – and we can only imagine how wonderful this was for the man. But the really greater experience is the evolution of the relationship to Jesus which this man, now-sighted, describes to neighbors, his parents, the Pharisees.

He goes from saying, "The man called Jesus" or "That man *they* call Jesus" a rather detached description - to "He is a prophet" to "He is a Man of God." He has received an interior sight...**the kind which opens our eyes to see more of what God sees.** Rather quickly, he is in relationship with Jesus because Jesus has given him sight and vision and insight into the new law.

The sighted man comes to this reality through difficult questioning and others' doubts about him. As he responds you can almost hear a growing anger or annoyance directed, especially toward the Pharisees. Repeatedly, he is asked questions and he reaches the point of challenging the Pharisees by whom he would have been intimidated this very morning; his own parents knew that intimidation. But not now. His fears and hesitations and the woefulness of his meager life – are all gone. Because he sees. At one point, he states, "I *know* I was blind; now I can see."

Those who study scripture write: "Knowing" in the gospel of John articulates relationship." This sighted man goes on to be a disciple of Jesus.

Indeed, we would all agree that this gospel is about darkness and light – the darkness of the world vs. the light of Christ. Lent can be a season of reflection. And on this Lenten day, taking it a step further, could sight and blindness also about the blind indifference we develop as a way of control as we cope with life versus the insight of faith?

One more thought: Perhaps our encounter with the Light of the world was at the baptismal font as infants; perhaps we got an inkling of the light as a member of a youth group; perhaps when someone we loved died unexpectedly and that loss was lightened by the experienced understanding of others; perhaps we had a medical diagnosis which made our hearts sink but a walk with a friend in faith brought peace. Or perhaps, in very ordinary ways we have known light. So many ways. Each time we can see and acknowledge this light, our relationship with God grows. This heart and soul relationship grows throughout a lifetime because God longs for that, pursues us, especially in the hard things of life.

Years ago, I was counseled by a Spiritual Director to help me process some of what I experienced in my chaplaincy work. And I was telling her once that I couldn't fall asleep because I couldn't let go of this sad anxiety. So I said to Jesus one night: "Please help me to *forget* this so I can sleep." And this wise woman asked, "Why didn't you invite Him into the anxiety? Don't you think He would know of that and help?" And I thought, "Really?" "Really!"

I'll end with a short story:

I've been a Type I diabetic for almost 60 years. I'm fortunate in that I have not experienced any of the serious complications of the disease. Well, perhaps just one:

In 1984, a small group of friends planned a trip to Israel, to the holy land. It was to be a pilgrimage where we would visit the places where Jesus walked, preached, healed.

A few weeks before we left, I lost the sight in my right eye, due to diabetic retinopathy. I was afraid and angry. After several eye exams by the doctor, future plans were made for treatment of the eye, and after much vacillation, I decided to make the trip. Physically, I had an unrelenting headache and very little sight in one eye.

While in Jerusalem, the group's spiritual director suggested that we visit the Pool of Siloam - where prayer would be offered for my healing. I have a hard time with too much attention given to me, and I thought, stubbornly, if God wanted me to regain my sight, then God and the retinal surgeon would do that. I was still angry and afraid, but given these friends and being touched by where we were, I didn't feel I could say, "No thanks."

The day was brilliant - blue skies and sun - the air was so clear. We approached the Pool of Siloam, which didn't look like a pool at all. It looked more like a canal, of sorts, where water was moving from outside, into a tunnel.

We gathered near the edge, and I knelt. I remember several things: the birds were talking to each other happily, warmth of the sun on my head, and when I knelt, I knelt on a pebble - and it hurt. I felt hands of friends on my shoulders and back; I heard a prayer being offered for me; and today's gospel story read. I leaned forward, cup the water and put it on my eye. It felt like time paused. But the moment passed. I leaned back and opened my eyes. I still could not see. But I was changed. My feelings of anger and fear were gone. The fight I had been waging with God was over. A small group of believers prayed for one in need at a significant place in a holy land - and God knew more than any of us what was needed.

Why do we think we know better than God? What can't we integrate into these minds, hearts, souls that God's desire for us is what is best? But this isn't just my story, this is the story of every one of us who lives in any place of darkness, whether it be of anger or fear OR ...

As a P.S. - months passed, treatment was done and my eyesight was restored.

We are halfway through Lent. This year's celebration of the day of Resurrection is in sight. Our loving, powerful God continues to heal and to draw us into a wider vision of life and faith.