

Fourth Sunday in Lent - March 19, 2023

John 9:1-41 (Good News Translation)

Focus: **Called to be life-giving**

Function: To remind people to be like Christ, being life-giving in our being with other and in all we do for others.

Today's Gospel reading focuses on a man born without sight. To all we can imagine, his world is always in darkness; pitch black. Even if he knows the way around since he grew up there, there's no colour to the flowers he smells, no face to the people he knows, and he can't make a living except to beg for alms. Therefore, how wonderful it would be for him to have sight!

If you have a friend or a loved one who has impaired vision and one day undergoes surgery to restore good vision, you would surely be rejoicing and celebrating with him or her, wouldn't you? It would be the same for this man who was born blind that he deserves a big celebration to rejoice in having his sight now, for the first time in his life. But sadly, that's not the reactions revealed in the story of John 9, which surprised me as I pondered.

The first surprise came from the community's reaction:

"His neighbours and the people who had seen him begging before this, asked, "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some said, "He is the one," but others said, "No he isn't; he just looks like him."

Apparently, they didn't recognize the man. I wonder why? Other than he's able to see and walk around without a walking stick now, has his look changed? He had lived in the community all his life, begging for a living. Many people in the community would have interacted with him, helped him in one way or another, with money or perhaps with food or water, and they would have encountered him in the synagogue as well. So, why did they fail to recognize him after he could see? Is it because his blindness was the only marker of his identity or was his disability the only thing people could ever see in him? Or perhaps these people had been too focussed on what & how they could "help" the man that they had not really known him or gotten close to him.

Even the disciples displayed a judgmental attitude when they asked Jesus "Teacher, whose sin caused him to be born blind? Was it his own or his parents' sin?"

Where was their sense of compassion when they encountered the blind man begging for alms, I wonder? Why must it be his or his parents' sin that he was born blind?

Do we sometimes behave like these people, easily categorise or label people based on the first impression we perceive, and get so caught up with such impressions that we fail to know the people behind them? There is always more to the story than meets the eye; hence, when we become preoccupied with our preconceptions of a person, we become blind to the person's actual needs and life situation.

When you encounter people who are differently abled (or who are different in ethnicity or looks), how would you approach and interact with them? Do we allow disability (or race or appearance) to be a defining marker, or can we look beyond that and recognize the humanness of the people? Like the encounter in the story, will we celebrate with people when they've gotten better or healed, instead of allowing our curiosity or disbelief to overwhelm and blind us? Do we approach people with the "saviour's" attitude that we are here to help, relieve, or fix people's life situations, thinking that we just do our part and go?

The second surprise came from the Jewish leaders' reaction: The Jewish leaders' response to the blind man's discovery of sight is appalling and downright unconcerned. They did not congratulate the man who now could see, rejoice and celebrate with him. But all they were concerned with was that he was healed on the Sabbath, which was wrong! So, all they wanted to know was how it happened and who did that so as to hold that person accountable.

The poor man's joy was all watered down as he was questioned repeatedly: "What did he do to you?" they asked. "How did he cure you of your blindness?" Obviously, they did not want to hear or believe the man's actual story but were looking for any part of his answer that could let them incriminate Jesus for breaking the Law. Their focus on such an outcome blinded them to the feelings of the man who now could see. Instead of celebrating with him, they grilled him with questions again and again, ignoring his true answers and the great disappointment and frustrations that built up in him. All they wanted was for Jesus to be the sinner instead of the hero; they wanted another explanation, one that would leave them in control of all the religious practices and beliefs.

Do we sometimes focus so much on the intended outcomes of our ministry and mission that the people we are ministering and reaching out to are merely our target recipients? Do we approach people solely with the mindset that we are here to help them, perhaps improve their mental, emotional or spiritual health, and their quality of life, and possibly receive the good news of Christ? They are not our achievements but our mission field. They are thirsting for God's love as much as we do, and we are called to be God's agents to share life with them so that they may experience God and God's love.

Even the man's parents' reaction surprised me as they had also failed him. I can't imagine any parents not rejoicing and jumping for joy for their son being

able to see now after being born blind, and not throwing a big celebration. And yet, the man's parents distanced themselves from him as they put their own welfare and safety ahead of their son's welfare. Perhaps they were reluctant to sacrifice their work, and connection with the community if they were to offend the Jewish leaders. Hence, cautiously they told the Jewish leaders, "We know that he is our son, and we know that he was born blind. But we do not know how it is that he is now able to see, nor do we know who cured him of his blindness. Ask him; he is old enough, and he can answer for himself!" Seemingly, the parents' fear had overwhelmed their joy, so they deserted their son to the authorities.

Are we sometimes also overly concerned with what we may lose or have to sacrifice such that we would rather forgo what we should do or be, especially in our ministry and mission? Have we made any compromises along the way, letting people down so that we are not?

I think we can easily feel the man's frustrations and disappointment. Once he gained his sights to see this beautiful world for the first time, he should be overwhelmed with joy and excitement that he would want people around him to celebrate with him, especially his parents and a few close friends, if any. But sadly, the interest of all the people around him wasn't on him. But instead, they were only keen to know how this had happened, why it happened, and it shouldn't have happened that day, which was the Sabbath. Even his parents distanced him. Due to their disbelief, this man had to explain how he came to receive his sight again and again and again.

However, Jesus approached him differently.

I wonder why Jesus needed to use his spittle on the ground to work out some mud to apply on the blind man's eyes so that he would gain his sight by washing in the Pool of Siloam? Wouldn't a simple command suffice?

In John 5, a man was ill for 38 years, and he lay helplessly by the pool next to the Sheep Gate, waiting for the right moment to get into the pool for healing, but no one would help him get in. When Jesus encountered him, by simply telling him, "Get up, pick up your mat, and walk," the man was healed instantly.

And in John 11, Jesus brought Lazarus back to life by commanding, "Lazarus, come out!" and Lazarus, who was already dead for 4 days, walked out of the tomb wrapped in the burial cloths. These are two examples out of many cases that Jesus healed someone simply by speaking.

In this story, the man was considered sinful for being born blind. And yet, Jesus approached him and gave him extraordinary care. Putting aside the cultural and theological theories of the use of saliva, let us imagine the scenario of Jesus

applying his spittle on the ground to make mud and then applying it to the man's eyes. Do try to imagine yourselves doing that.

Jesus would have to come very close to the man, face to face, and perhaps breadth to breadth. Jesus would have to hold the man's head steady with one hand while rubbing the mud on one eye with the other hand, then changing hands.

So, it is undoubtedly easier to simply say the word, and the man's eyes will see, isn't it? Why bother going through all the trouble of making mud with saliva and getting so close to the sinful, unclean man? This is plausibly what Jesus' disciples and the bystanders were wondering.

How about us? If you were in the same situation as Jesus, which way or method would you take?

Indeed, Jesus was in solidarity with the blind man, encountering him where he was, holding him, and being concerned about him. And this encounter not only brought the man sight but also led him to experience God's grace and the growth of faith in Jesus.

Once knowing what the man had gone through and that he was thrown out of the synagogue, Jesus approached him to bring him consolation, asking, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" As Jesus offered him this good news, we can see joy and hope stirring up within as he answered, "Tell me who he is, sir, so that I can believe in him!" He was eager to know and follow Jesus, and he immediately knelt before Jesus, confessing, "I believe, Lord!" Jesus's loving care for him had indeed led him to experience God's life-giving grace.

Similarly, with the help of the Holy Spirit, our loving care & concern extended may help someone walk out of darkness and into the light of Christ. We begin by journeying alongside them. So, as Jesus's followers, we are all called to be life-giving in our being with others and in all we do for others. May we all respond to God's call today. Amen.