

Week 4

...See and love in us what you see and love in Christ...

(from Preface for Sundays of Ordinary Time VII)

This is a tale of two journeys: one a gradual movement towards the light, and the other a spiral into increasing darkness. The rhythm of the storytelling is masterful. The ebb and flow of the drama serves to establish the direction of the major players, either towards or away from Jesus. The scene is set two chapters earlier, when Jesus describes himself as “the water of life” and “the light of the world”. By the end of this story, those with eyes to see will acknowledge the truth of both claims.

From chapter 7 until chapter 10:21, Jesus is in Jerusalem to participate in the Feast of Tabernacles. This eight day celebration was the biggest and most popular of the three annual pilgrimage feasts. Significantly, there were three major rituals conducted each day of the festival. Each morning a water ceremony was celebrated. This consisted of a procession to the Pool of Siloam, a major reservoir in the city, where water was collected in a golden jug and then processed back to the Temple. Once at the altar, this water and some wine were poured into two vessels. Recalling Ezekiel’s Old Testament imagery of water flowing out from the Temple (Ezk 47:1-12), the priest would allow the contents to flow out over the altar. Each night there was also the ceremony of light, where the pilgrims danced under lighted candles while the Levites sang Psalms 120-134. Thirdly, there was the Rite of Facing the Temple, where each dawn the priests would turn their backs on the rising sun and face the Temple as a sign of Israel’s allegiance to the one true God.

This story is set on the last day of the feast when the pilgrims were observing a joy-filled Sabbath. It was then that Jesus stood in the Temple and embraced the major symbols of the festival as signs of his own mission. He declared, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me” (7:37) and later added, “I am the light of the world” (8:12). It is through

Jesus' encounter with the man born blind that John invites the reader to grow in understanding of Jesus' claims.

This event begins with a theological question. In first century Judaism, disability and disease were regarded as signs of the terrible judgement of God. In the disciples' thinking, someone's sin is to blame for this man's blindness. They are more interested in the technicalities of this proposition than the state of the man's health or his future prospects. Moving quickly beyond their short-sightedness, Jesus simply replies that this situation is no one's "fault". Rather this man, understood as "cursed", is to become a sign of God's goodness.

Jesus makes a mud paste, a traditional practice for treating eye diseases, and tells the man to go and wash in the Pool of Siloam. The author's note on the meaning of the name of the reservoir provides a double meaning. Not only has the blind man been *sent* by Jesus to wash, but also Jesus has been *sent* into the world to be "living water". The man responds without hesitation to Jesus' word; he goes, he washes and he comes back healed. Unconditional response to the Word has previously led to other miracles in John's story (2:1-12; 4:46-54; 5:2-9), highlighting both the expectations and possibilities for those who choose to follow Jesus.

The blind beggar has been transformed. Rather than this leading to acceptance of Jesus, as one might expect, it leads to division and dispute. Despite the man's confirmation of his identity and the re-telling of his story of healing, neighbours and acquaintances come to no firm conclusion about what has happened. To solve their quandary and to report a breach of the Law, they take the man to the Pharisees.

Again an account is given of how the man came to see. Unconvinced, the Pharisees send for the man's parents. Because of his parents' reluctance to offer any case to support Jesus or their son, the spotlight fades on them as quickly as it has been shone. Here, John is offering more than a mere cameo appearance by the man's mother and father. It is also a commentary on John's community and their pervading fear of the Jewish authorities. Displayed here by the lack of commitment of the man's parents, the reluctance of some to become involved in any public debate or profession of faith was obviously an issue. Hesitation in the face of hostility has remained an obstacle for every generation of believers.

Again the Jewish leaders interrogate the man, and again he insists on the truth of his experience and expresses faith in the one who healed him. Perplexed and frustrated, the leaders “ejected him”, mirroring the experience of John’s community as they too were “ejected” from synagogue worship because of their belief that Jesus was the Christ. Although Jesus has never really been absent, he re-enters the story. Jesus finds the man and leads him to a full profession of faith. Jesus’ Jewish opponents, who correspond to John’s contemporary antagonists, refuse to believe. Meanwhile the man born blind, who has lived in darkness, has seen a great light. When he comes to sight, the man acknowledges that Jesus is the light of the world. This is more than a physical cure; through Jesus, his whole person has been re-made. This man’s journey is a parable of the many journeys to the One Light.

- Trachoma is an entirely preventable blinding eye disease. Australia is the only developed country in the world where cases of trachoma are still found. It is reported in unacceptable levels in many remote Aboriginal communities. Essentially, it is blindness caused by poverty. There is a world of difference between physical blindness and spiritual blindness, but John’s gospel depicts the Pharisees as being blinded by their own poverty. Is there a “spiritual poverty” (eg despair, selfishness, anger) in my life that serves to maintain my blindness towards the needs of others? Towards the presence of God?
- The disciples asked, “Who sinned?” when they saw the man born blind. Contemporary believers like to think of themselves as being above this kind of thinking, but thoughts of punishment and curse are never far below the surface when illness occurs or disability is experienced. “What have I (or they) done to deserve this?” is exactly the same question that is asked of Jesus. How do you see God’s role in human suffering?

- The parents of the man born blind refused to be drawn into discussion about Jesus or their son. Sometimes it is wise not to be drawn into religious debate; on other occasions it is crucial and imperative. How have I handled such situations and what did it teach me about my own faith?
- Jesus is the light of the world. What do you see as the darkness of this world and how does the life and teaching of Jesus offer an alternative to such darkness? What have been some of the moments of enlightenment for you in your journey of faith?