

As is usual in St John, today's gospel is replete with multiple levels of meaning. Take the very matter of blindness, for example. The man is blind in the usual sense of the word, yet the episode begins with the blindness of the apostles, who foolishly ask: "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Yes, by a miracle, Jesus restores the man's earthly sight. But he gives him so much more: he gives him the ability to see, that is, to believe who Jesus really is.

As with the Samaritan woman last week, so with this man, coming to faith is a gradual process. "He is a prophet," he tells the Pharisees, and further, "I don't know if he is a sinner; I only know that I was blind and now I can see." It takes a second encounter with Jesus for his eyes of faith to be fully opened: only then can he say, "Lord, I believe", and worship him.

As Lent proceeds, we feel the forces of evil closing in on Jesus: we sense, to use John's imagery, the darkness approaching. This particular Lent, of course, we feel exactly that, as we see the epidemic spreading around the world and we feel its effects, social and economic, even if we have not yet seen the sickness in anyone we know. Like the apostles, we may be both confused and fearful.

The Gospel reveals Jesus as the Light. Indeed, today we celebrate *Lætare* Sunday, *Rejoice* Sunday, as the vestments take on a lighter, rosaceous hue. If, in the face of a virus which is taking lives and will take more, we see some of the worst of human behaviour, we see also some of the best. In the parish, for example, not just the "regulars" but new people volunteering for the first time to bring food or other necessities to those confined. On our televisions we have seen the heroics of medical personnel and young volunteers serving the sick, much as in the bushfires – so recent in our memory – we saw the heroics of the fire-fighters.

This much we can see with our earthly eyes, and it is wonderful to see: but Jesus offers us something more. In next week's Gospel – the raising of Lazarus – we shall see that Jesus offers hope even in death. This plague which is coming will take lives. It is not alarmist to say that it may take mine, or yours. That is just a fact – one we should be ready for. If we can find faith in Jesus, if we drink the water that he is offering, if open our eyes in faith to what he showed us in the raising of Lazarus, then we can accept it, with many regrets, perhaps, especially for those left behind, but without personal fear, believing that it is not the end, but rather what we were created for. *You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee*, in the famous words of Augustine. We know then that all we leave behind – family, of course, but also our friends, our labours and our achievements – all these are part of the meaningfulness of our lives, which achieve their full meaning,

however, only in the Kingdom with Christ. We have accomplished this much. We might have hoped to do more, but this, at least, we have done.

In the Dominican *Rite of Anointing the Sick* – used for members and associates of the Order – there is a medieval hymn or *sequence* which addresses the dying friar. I will conclude with just a few verses (in my own, faltering translation):

O dear brother, if you leave,
be not in your heart aggrieved;
what you see God wills for you
must with joy be your will too!

Who laments if they are freed
from risk of travel, and with speed?
Who, while clinging to a spar,
Wishes land to be afar?

What stock of goods on your account
God will prepare, in what amount,
no living man may think or say:
the measure stored up for that day...

Since to that joy which he foretold
the Lord may call you, from our fold
run confident, run full of love
to claim those trophies from above.

Of studies missed you must not fret
nor of the things you know not yet,
for soon you will the world appraise,
the Cause of all within your gaze.

You hoped through greater deeds,
perchance,
God's glory somehow to enhance
but sure, 'tis not for you to say
how Providence of God holds sway.

May Jesus, who knows what is best
in providence for his elect,
by his gracious deeds uncover
what he wills for you, our brother.

Amen.

- Martin Wallace OP
Lætare Sunday, 22 March, 2020