

Sunday of the Man Born Blind
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21st May 2017
John 9:1-38

You might remember, as I have told you many times, that the fathers, when they composed the lectionary for the Liturgy in Great Lent, had in mind the catechumens, those preparing for Baptism. I think that they had the same group of people in mind, as well, when they chose the gospel readings for the period after Pascha. Only, now, those people had crossed the bar, passed over the line; they were now numbered among the faithful and lived in Christ.

What has happened mystically to those one-time candidates for baptism is now revealed in a series of episodes from St John's gospel. As on Thomas Sunday, they too have confessed Christ as their Lord and God. With the holy myrrh bearers they have come to know that the body of the old Adam has been anointed and sanctified for they too are part of the body of Christ. Like the paralytic, they have been raised up from the earth. And as the Samaritan woman encountered Christ and was enlightened, they also can converse with God, praying and worshipping in Spirit and in Truth.

So it is today with the story of the man born blind. The story of this healing by Christ has been carefully presented by the evangelist; a significant story, reflecting the common experience of the early Christians. And it was chosen by the compilers of our lectionary as illustrating what had happened to those who had been baptised into Christ.

A little investigation reveals that all these gospels for the Sundays of Pascha are obviously supposed to call to our minds the mystery of Baptism: the anointing, the pools of water, the well, the washing: the symbols cannot be mistaken. Just as the story of the multiplication of the loaves recalls the Eucharist, so this healing of the man born blind is a symbol of Christian baptism.

The man, in a sense, represents us all for inheriting the nature of the fallen Adam, we all appear in this world spiritually blind. When the crowd ask if this really is the man concerned, after he is healed, he himself declares it quite openly: I am he, he says. Think further on in the gospel, when Christ is presented by Pontius Pilate to the crowd,

after He had been mocked and scourged, Pilate says, “*Behold the man!*” Christ not only became fully what we are at his birth but in his life bore our suffering, identifying with the man born blind, with you and me and the whole of our condition, whether physical or spiritual: not that they can be separated.

Just as Christ became a mockery for us, crowned in thorns and robed in an ironic cloak of imperial purple, what a sight this man must have been, sent off stumbling along the way to the pool at Siloam, the dusty earth smeared on his useless eyes. Yet it is the same mud from which this son of Adam was created; the same mud which will hang on a cross and rise from the dead. So this mud must be washed and enlightened by an encounter with Saviour.

Through the sacramental healing, not only are his eyes opened for the first time but he looks upon the face of Christ. What does aged Simeon say when he sees the Christ-child brought to the mosaic temple: “*Mine* eyes have seen Thy *salvation...a* light to lighten the gentiles and the glory of Thy people *Israel.*”

This must remind us that our own baptism was not the end of our endeavour, only the beginning. The rite of baptism makes this abundantly clear. The letter to the Hebrews calls baptism illumination (6:4); St Paul writing to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:21-22) and John in his first epistle (1 Jn.2:20) both call it an anointing which must have been part of the early ceremonies around baptism. The grace of baptism opened our spiritual eyes and makes us able, even in this clay, this mud, to see the glory of God, or rather, makes us capable, sets us free to seek our entry into the kingdom of heaven, presuming we have the faith, the desire and the will to do so.

We have, therefore, a two-fold task: to work our own salvation in fear and trembling and to save others - those around us. But none of this is done on our own. Even here, with the man born blind, Christ is with his disciples and will employ and commission them in the same work. So it is with our own encounter with Christ - what began for many of us as babes-in-arms, or whether we encountered Christ later and were baptised later, or even knew Christ imperfectly until we discovered the Orthodox Christ, or rather, He was uncovered for us

in the Faith - it matters not. What matters is that we stay in communion with Him.

And we have all the means at our disposal for the mystery of the kingdom of God is there in the Pearl of Great Price, what we call the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church holds all we need and more so that, with the grace of God, we can complete the work. As Christ Himself says later in John's gospel: (Jn14:12) "**Most** assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My **Father**." Yes, we have indeed been entrusted with a common task to save ourselves and to save others, those inside the household of faith and those still outside.

Like Thomas, like the myrrh bearers, like the paralytic, like the Samaritan woman and this man born blind, we too can encounter Christ. He can be there every day of our life, as He Himself promised to be with us to the end of the age, if only we use the means at our disposal. He is there in the communion of the saints, the fellowship and the common life of the Church; He is there in the holy mysteries, after our baptism and chrismation, speaking to us and healing our falls through repentance and confession; feeding our souls within Himself in the Holy Gifts; blessing and sanctifying our sicknesses and sufferings through holy anointing; reigning over the homes of those who in faithfulness have their witness to Christ crowned as man and wife. He is there to be encountered in the regular reading and study of the Holy Scriptures and especially in the gospels. He enlightens and still teaches any who join in prayer with the liturgical cycle of the Church, drawing the mind through the story of salvation.

He is there alongside us in our struggle against sin and there to be found in the poor, the outcast, the sick, the hungry and the destitute; in fact, wherever a demand is made on the love God. We have no excuse, the means of encountering and knowing Christ are all round and about us. Only let us fix our hearts on Christ, making our own that conversation at the end of the gospel today: "**Do** you believe in the Son of **God**?" He answered and said, "**Who** is He, Lord, that I may believe in **Him**?" And Jesus said to him, "**You** have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with **you**." then he said, "Lord, I **believe!**" And he worshiped Him.