

4th Sunday of Lent (A)
(1 Samuel 16:1.6-7.10-13 / John 9:1-41)
22.03.2020

'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?'

Confronted with an ill they didn't understand, it was the disciples – men close to Jesus – who asked this question.

Just like the followers of Jesus during His days on earth, those men who wanted to know who was responsible for the plight of the man born blind, so many people today are inclined to look for someone to blame for the ill engulfing our world. At the very least, they are looking for an answer to the question: *Who or what is responsible for the terrible pandemic which holds our world in its grip at present?*

Jesus didn't give the disciples the answer they were expecting. He didn't opt for either of the options they put to Him.

'Neither he nor his parents sinned', Jesus answered.

So who was responsible for the man's ill then? Was it God? After all, He had created the man. Had God willed that this man be born blind and suffer from the terrible malady of cecity all his life?

Is God responsible for Covid19?

Is God the one who sent this ill which is afflicting so many in our world?

Is the corona virus which is robbing large numbers of people of their lives and debilitating others (an ill that is beginning to grind so much activity in our world to a halt) part of God's great design for humanity?

These are questions people are posing.

Maybe we ourselves are asking questions which go along similar lines.

As I have already stated when speaking from this pulpit earlier in the week, the kind of conclusion that some have arrived at – namely, that which suggests that the corona virus is a punishment sent by God, an ill the Lord has chosen to inflict upon us – betrays a rather strange image of God and probably says more about the people who come up with this short-cut answer than it does about the Lord we are called to love and serve; the God whom the whole of biblical revelation stresses is a *God of mercy and redemption*.

Our God is not an angry despot. He is not a vindictive, *out to get us* deity. The Lord does not inflict ills upon us in order to *get back at us* for our misdemeanours – even our gravest sins, our most grievous infidelities and our most terrible forgetfulness of Him.

Far from it!

The Lord our *God stretches out His mighty arm to save us from deadly perils. He wants that all be saved; that none come to destruction.*

Just think of God's mercy in regard to the people of Nineveh. Jonah, the prophet – God's most reluctant prophet, it has to be said – just could not fathom the Lord's love for a people who had done so much wrong in regard to His own Chosen People, Israel, His Elect. Jonah could not understand and did not want to grasp – he certainly did not want to relay to the people of Nineveh – the plan for their redemption which the Lord God held in His heart. Jonah would rather have died first. And yet... And yet, God made this prophet speak forth in His name the message of life he wanted the Ninevites to hear. The Lord would not let Jonah escape the fulfilment of his mission: *Go to the people of Nineveh!*

God revealed Himself to the people of Nineveh – sworn enemies of His own Chosen People – to be *the Lord of mercy and compassion*.

If that is how the Lord is shown to have revealed Himself in regard to His enemies, how can those who claim to be God's people today see God as somehow taking pleasure in seeing the inhabitants of our world – and quite possibly themselves – punished by the present sickness inflicting so many?

You may remember that beautiful passage in the Book of Exodus which depicts Moses bidden to stand before the Lord as He passes by his servant's way and pronounces these words: *I am the Lord God. The Lord a merciful and gracious God. Slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness*.

The same affirmation is found in the Book of Nehemiah: *In your great mercies, You do not make an end of people or forsake them, for You are a gracious and merciful God*.

The psalmist declares: *For You, O God, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon You*.

The prophet Joel echoes this thought: *Abounding in steadfast love, You are a faithful God. You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger*.

With all these lines of Scripture – to which we could add so many others besides – how did we ever manage to create for ourselves, and then convey to others, the image of God that so many people carry around in their hearts? The image of an angry, harsh and ruthless God... an image that even those who were disciples of Jesus when He walked this earth erroneously gave way to; an image that those who are His disciples today are still wont to give way to?

The answer is in the question!

We did what we were forbidden to do. We created images for ourselves!

Our false images of God are not the true God, they are worthless idols... and yet they can dominate us, because we invest them with a power over us that they should never have!

One of our great handicaps is that so many of us are like Jonah.

Do you remember his story in the Bible? He was the reticent prophet; the one who did not want to go to Nineveh, where the Lord had sent him to *proclaim a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*.

Although we resemble Jonah, I suspect many of us would deny the level of our vindictiveness more than he denied his.

At least Jonah had the honesty to admit that he didn't want to see the Ninevites' sins forgiven. Jonah's desire was to see Israel's ancient enemy – the people of Nineveh – punished for their offences. When Jonah prayed, he had the honesty to admit to his failing to see things in the way God saw them: *O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious God and mercifully slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster*.

A line from today's first reading from the Book of Samuel states simply: *God does not see as man sees*. That God's way of seeing things is different to our way of seeing them is something the prophet Isaiah also touched upon.

In Isaiah 55 we find these words relayed to the people as a message from God Himself (I relay them here in slightly different translations): *I don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work. My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. This plan of mine is not what you would work out, neither are my thoughts the same as yours*.

God does not see as man sees. Unfortunately, all too often, we do not see as God sees!

God doesn't look at our world right now to pass harsh judgement upon it. He looks upon our world from the perspective of the cross – with arms wide open, arms wanting to embrace our world. He looks upon us with a heart pierced through; and so He not only sees, but He also feels our pain as He looks upon so much suffering in the world. He is aware of the terror and fear gripping so many people's lives. Our God looks upon our world not with the eyes of a merciless judge, but those of One who has a compassionate heart; One who is moved with pity.

Our Lord does not look at our world from afar. He is with His people. He is there in the hospital wards in Bergamo. He is with those ill in hospital here on this island and right across the world. He is with those who are living in isolation. He looks upon all of us kindly. He sees each one of us bathed in His own light.

It is in that same light – His light – that He wants us to see ourselves and all those around us.

In the context where we find those words from Isaiah I quoted a few moments ago (the expressions about the difference between God's ways and ours), an invitation is addressed to us to turn to the Lord to allow ourselves to be enlightened by Him: *Let them turn to the Lord that He may show mercy, to our God that He may abundantly pardon!*

God does not see as man sees.

The Lord has a greater regard for people – a greater regard for us – than we have! No one – no matter what little consequence they may be considered as having by another, or whatever little consequence they may see themselves as having – is of small importance to God.

All of us matter to the Lord. Every one of us matters to our God. Even the last and the least of us... like David, who wasn't even thought important enough to be presented to Samuel.

The Lord looks upon all of us with loving tenderness, genuine care, real consideration.

I have referred to Isaiah 55. A little further on in Isaiah's prophecy – in chapter 58 – we read these reassuring words which tie in with the theme of our enlightenment which is developed in today's Gospel passage which is an Early Church Baptismal Catechesis on the enlightening effect of our immersion in Christ.

Here is what we find in Isaiah 58:8-9: *God will shed His own glorious light upon you. He will heal you; your godliness will lead you forward, goodness will be a shield before you, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind. When you call, the Lord will answer. 'Yes, I am here', He will quickly reply.* These promises are made in a passage wherein the people are called to exercise merciful compassion, to be attentive to others' needs and not just their own.

If we focus our attention only on our own life alone right now, paying attention exclusively to ourselves, excusing ourselves from caring about others, or giving ourselves licence to ignore other people's welfare, then none of us will survive!

We must learn to live in solidarity with each other... and solidarity with each other right now means keeping a respectful distance from each other, in order to maintain good health, so as to ensure that, if and when one or other of us is stricken with the ill which threatens us, those who are willing to care for us on front-line services of medical care will have the possibility of doing so. It is for this reason that this church and other churches across the land are not open for public gatherings at the moment. God's plan for us right now includes our helping

one another by staying in our homes and not circulating unnecessarily – even daring to live a Eucharistic Fast, because that is what is asked of us.

While it has been important to try to make sense out of what we are living through at this time in the light of God's word – bringing it to bear upon the reality of our lives at this challenging time – it is important that we don't lose sight of the important baptismal catechesis given to us in today's Gospel passage.

So, let's turn specifically to that text now.

Might I suggest that we approach today's Gospel passage from John 9 by just imagining for a moment what it would be like to have been born blind, not able to see people we love or contemplate the world around us? What a chilling thought!

Then go on to imagine how we would feel if, to add insult to injury, people were to insinuate that we find ourselves in the sad state we are in, shrouded in darkness, because of some personal misdemeanour (presumably dating from before birth, since we were born blind), or some terrible sin that was not our own, but that of our parents – the very people who loved us into being. What a horrible thought that is!

We can presume that the blind man spoken of in today's Gospel passage – like most people who are blind – had good hearing, and even acute hearing. We can take it that he heard the disciples' question and the in-built insinuations it contained.

Since most people who are blind are very sensory and also emotionally sensitive, the blind man may well have *picked up on* the suspicions all around him, even if he didn't actually hear them articulated – including those suspicions which emanated from Jesus' closest followers.

That was not all the blind man had to contend with. Even after his cure, hostile criticism was directed towards him by the Pharisees because of his association with Jesus who had ministered to him and brought about his healing – and on a Sabbath day into the bargain!

If the story of the man's physical recovery was already quite extraordinary – giving him a new lease of life – his cure was only the beginning of the change wrought in his life. After learning to use his physical sight, he also came to understand that he was called to start seeing all things through the eyes of faith. The man born blind was led into the light of truth. He came to see Jesus to be *Messiah*, the *Anointed One* sent by God, the *Saviour of the world*, who had for mission to lead those who dwelt in darkness into an experience of enlightenment.

The same kind of spiritual vision that was given the man healed of his blindness is needed in our world today, for, in so many ways, our world, if it is not totally blind, is, at the very least, terribly short-sighted and somewhat blinkered.

We didn't see coming what has hit us these past months – in Ireland just these past four weeks. Maybe we just didn't want to. We had *other fish to fry* – or so we thought! We were caught up in other things which now seem somewhat trivial – at least not really necessary; things that pre-occupied many of us. These Gospel words comes to mind: *You worry and fret about so many little things and yet few are necessary, indeed, only one.*

The present ill and the measures taken to combat it have led us to realise that so many things we thought we just couldn't do without don't really matter that much at all.

There has been a little poster on a lampstand as you drive into Warrenpoint from Newry for some time now – since before the virus hit us. It reads: *Health more important than wealth.* How right!

Right now, we are all taking that message seriously – or so I would like to think!
Perhaps the present difficulties we are experiencing have been – certainly they could be – instrumental in bringing us to consider what really matters in our lives.

The blind man in the Gospel came to see what really mattered: life with Christ; life immersed in Christ; life bathed in Christ's light.

Is this is what really matters to us – even those of us who are supposedly committed Christians? Is Christ truly our life? Is He truly our light?

Let us pray today: *Let the light of Your face shine upon us, O Lord, and we shall be saved! Saved: redeemed and protected by You!*

To those of you who are afraid as you follow this Eucharist in your homes via the webcam link, I address an invitation to turn to God's word right now and murmur in the secret of your hearts some lines from a psalm with which I end this reflection. The psalm I refer to is a prayer of confidence and trust in God in a period of trouble and distress: *The Lord is my light and my help, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, before whom shall I shrink?*

Hope in Him, hold firm and take heart. Hope in the Lord!