

A sermon preacher at Choral Evensong on Sunday 26th March 2006, the Fourth Sunday of Lent, by the Precentor, Canon Ralph Godsall

‘One thing I know, that though I was blind, now I can see.’ (John 9:25)

This story has always been used at this season of the year as a preparation for Christian baptism. St Augustine said, ‘This blind man stands for the human race ...illumination is faith....He washes the eyes in that pool – he was baptized in Christ.’ The artistry with which the story is told is astonishing. St John draws portraits of increasing insight on the part of the man blind from birth, and hardening unawareness on the part of his religious interrogators. Three times the former blind man, who is truly gaining knowledge, humbly confesses his ignorance. ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ Three times the Pharisees, who are really plunging deeper into ignorance about Jesus, make confident statements about him. The climax of the story falls a little outside the passage we have just heard, when the blind man says, ‘Lord, I believe’ and ‘he worshipped him’.

At some moments in life we become aware of spiritual malnutrition. We are programmed to live as if the most real thing in the world were the shell of the surface-self we have constructed for ourselves as life has gone on. All human beings in their mother’s womb are born with an experience of oneness with the source of life, but very early on we set to work subconsciously building a shell for protection and a surface-self so that we can negotiate with the world around us. This, I think, is the significance of the fact that the man in the story had been blind from birth.

Gradually that experience of oneness with the well-spring of life is lost, a crust forms over our deepest self (a crust of unawareness which is often described in spiritual terms as blindness) and we come to operate more and more from what we have constructed, from the shell, the false self. In Psalm 100 we are reminded that ‘it is God who has made us and not we ourselves.’ Our true self and our deepest self flows from the source of All Being, the mystery of God. The effect of operating from the shell of our surface-self is, in the end, exhaustion and emptiness.

One of the salutary spiritual disciplines of Lent is reconnecting ourselves with the source of true life and vitality. St John says, ‘In him was life, the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness’ (John 1:4-5). The God who revealed himself as ‘I am’, the name he disclosed to Moses, true Being, does not communicate with us as a dominator with an iron law. Laws are necessary in this fallen world, but they can react with our personality-building to produce an even more brittle way of being in the world. Being, the Source of Life, the Great I Am, Almighty God, comes in the person of one who spat upon the ground and made clay of the spittle, to invite us, to entice us into connectedness.

Those who are bound up with the surface-self they have so painfully constructed are contemptuous or afraid like the Pharisees. They seek to destroy the One who proclaims with his life, death and resurrection, that you come to God by subtraction and humility rather than by addition and self-projection. ‘The world was made by him and the world know him not’ (John 1:10).

‘But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become children of God’ (John 1:12). If we are prepared to receive sight and know that we are blind, then there is a gift here for us in Lent. God has opened a way to reconnect with life in all its fullness and delight.

As George Herbert reminds us in his poem ‘Love bade me welcome’, God found a way through his defences. Jesus Christ, in his life and living Spirit, shows us that we must give self away in order to grow in soul. One of the spiritual explorers of our time, John Main, has taught me a simple way of prayer – a period morning and evening in simple contemplation. I have tired of simply instructing God in his duties in the daily offices. Gradually this simple form of prayer has helped me see more light which no longer comes from my own generator but is the uncreated light of God himself.

Suffice it to say, that once you have glimpsed the true light, the false glamour of the neon strip is revealed and you cannot be satisfied with anything else. Truly this is a door into a new way of being in the world. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I can see.