

Homily 4th Sunday in Lent (26.3.17)

From blindness to sight - superficial to real

This longer version of the gospel for the 4th Sunday of Lent (Year A) gives us a fuller and deeper meaning of what Jesus, through John, is trying to teach us. John weaves all that Jesus is telling us in such a way that YOU can insert YOUR name throughout much of this gospel. The blind man is never named - John wants you to insert your own name for the blind man – that blind man is you. We are blind in many ways, although we often don't recognise it. We're blind sometimes in the sense of that first reading. We think we see, and we look at appearances, but we don't judge wisely - we're attracted by beauty. We forget that beauty is only skin deep. We fail to look for a deeper reality and meaning. In the advertising world the 'body beautiful' is put to us as the norm - of course we know it isn't, but we are attracted by superficial appearances and messages.

I read a book some time ago, entitled 'Losses in later life,' written by a Christian psychiatrist. He points out that many of his clients had been women – and some men too, who from their earliest years had been praised for their good looks, but as time went on, were having real 'self image' problems. They had been judged on and praised for their outward appearance, and were having real problems with peoples changed perception of them. They had associated their 'worth' with their beauty. They had lost their identity, they had been affirmed by appearance and not by substance. In this gospel when the Pharisees asked Jesus if the blind man's parents had sinned, and therefore God had made their child blind, Jesus utterly refutes that erroneous notion, and He goes on to say that people who are born with some form of disability know they have to earn their worth, and this in turn can be character forming, and make that person a much stronger, and in many cases, a much nicer person. Jesus says that this is the work of God, to show us that it is not necessarily a blessing to be beautiful, to have everything handed to us on a plate, as it were.

You'll remember Fr Mark. He had a great interest in art, and collected pictures by Stanley Spencer, and this artist deliberately painted pictures of an ugly, overweight, unshaven Christ. At first glance, we would all think - oh how terrible and cruel and disrespectful - but Spencer had a deep and rather beautiful reason for doing this. He wanted to point out that character is not in appearance, a person's worth is not in how they look - and in the case of Christ - the message and teaching of Christ far outweighs any superficial appearances. We are blinded by appearance and superficiality.

Jesus leads us on a journey of faith, and the blind person, like us at this moment, encounters Christ. But of course in this narrative you could also be the Pharisee - you may at times deliberately not recognise Christ, be blind to His message, close your eyes to the needs of others, and our duties to God. We can be blinded by decadence, bias, upbringing - our stubborn natures unwilling to change, and embrace the light. We are blinkered, like the Pharisees, and refuse to let Jesus work His grace in us. Often we need someone else to engage with us, and let us see our blindness. When have I turned off the switch of ongoing conversion, and refused the light, the grace of Christ in my life? When have I closed my mind to the revelation of God? The Pharisees were condemned because of their obstinate blindness, and Jesus says, you don't want to be in this position. Obstinate blindness damages us as people, and ultimately damages the soul. I cannot accept this, I refuse to believe this - despite the manifest and life changing experiences of others, and the powerful, divine and life enhancing message of Jesus Christ.

And so, this Lent, this gospel compels us to insert our names in the text - are we the blind man who hears the words of Jesus, grows in faith and recognises Him as the Son of God, or are we the Pharisee, overwhelmed with obstinate blindness, and refusing to change, to look at ourselves as we really are, and to do something about it? This week, this coming week, let us examine our consciences and see just where we are as we approach Easter, and what we, as individuals need to change to become more beautiful inside for Christ!