

4th SUNDAY OF LENT – A (April 3, 2011)

Fr. Kopacek

My remarks today will be briefer than usual since we are celebrating the sacrament of anointing of the sick at all the Masses this weekend. But I cannot let this wonderful gospel reading go by without a comment or two. Like last week's story of the Samaritan woman at the well, this story of Jesus' healing of the man born blind is one of high drama and great power. The drama comes in with the Pharisees (who were afflicted with a blindness of their own making) becoming increasingly frustrated in their attempts to demonize Jesus for violating the Sabbath, while the formerly blind man is simply telling his story honestly and forthrightly. In fact, he ultimately comes to faith in Jesus—the story certainly comes to a happy ending for him.

Two specific elements in this story caught my attention, both occurring at the beginning. First, after noticing the man born blind, the disciples asked Jesus whose sin led to his blindness: his own or his parents. It was commonly thought at the time that a physical illness or other ailment was the result or consequence of someone's sin. Jesus had to disabuse them of that notion and replied that the man's blindness was not the result of sin; rather, it was allowed by God so that his divine works might be made visible through the man. Even in our own time, some may worry that their sickness or other crisis must be the result of their own sin: "God must be punishing me for something." Not at all. God is not some sadistic deity who enjoys seeing us suffer and therefore afflicts us with particular trials or sickness. And while we admittedly do not understand why God allows suffering, we do know that he can and does bring grace and goodness and peace out of even our heaviest burdens.

In addition, we can't help but notice how Jesus chose to bring sight to the blind man. He could have simply spoken a word for that healing to occur, but instead Jesus chose to do so by very earthy means: spitting on the ground, making a mud paste out of that dirt, and applying it to the man's eyes. And after washing in a certain pool, the blindness was gone. To our 21st-century ears, that sounds distinctly unhygienic, to say the least...if not in fact more than a bit disgusting. And you will be relieved to know that that is not how we treat eye ailments these days! But it is remarkable how often Jesus used very basic things of the earth to accomplish his works of grace and how he taught the apostles to do the same.

That is nowhere more true than in our celebration of the sacraments that Jesus gave us. Think of what power the waters of baptism have to cleanse one from all sin, or what bread and wine can accomplish when consecrated by a priest using Jesus' own words into our Savior's very Body and Blood. Or consider the oil used for anointing of the sick which we celebrate today, a sacrament whose basis comes directly from the New Testament letter of St. James. This oil comes from the olive; again, a simple fruit of the earth. But when it is blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass, it takes on the healing power of God—healing of mind and soul, and even physical healing if God so ordains. Those of you who are a bit older recall that this sacrament used to be called extreme unction and was given only near the moment of death. Its use was broadened after the Second Vatican Council so that it can be offered to those who are seriously ill or whose health is seriously impaired (thus, for example, it is not appropriate for the common cold or a case of the sniffles). The elderly may receive anointing if they 'have become notably weakened even though no serious illness is present'; children may also be anointed in the case of serious illness if they are old enough to have a basic understanding of the sacrament.

The man born blind received priceless gifts from Jesus: certainly the gift of physical sight, but also the gift of saving faith. He was able to see the world with the eyes of his body, but he could now also see who and what Jesus is with his new eyes of faith as well. As we prepare now to celebrate the sacrament of anointing, may we praise and thank God who has given us through his Son these sacraments by which we can see even more deeply the wonders of his saving truth and his healing love.