

## **First Impressions**

1 Samuel 16: 1b, 6-7, 10-13a

## **FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A)**

Psalms 23

Ephesians 5: 8-14

John 9: 1-41

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

At first glance Jesus' healing of the blind man seems like a cure of just one blind person. But, judging from the amount of time John spends on this story, we can conclude his intent is not just to narrate a miraculous cure of one person. Instead, the story has a much larger scope with implications for us all. John is not telling us that one man was born blind and Jesus cured him; but that we humans are "blind from birth" and we all need healing.

The physical treatment takes place quickly at the opening of the story. But John tells the story with much detail to emphasize the further sight the man receives as the narrative progresses. The physical healing certainly gets the man's attention and the attention of those around him. After his cure the man's inner sight develops; he will go from physical darkness to physical light—his cure. But, by the time the story has ended, he will make the more profound journey from spiritual darkness to spiritual light. He will "see" Jesus, and he will be healed, his inner darkness will be illumined by the light that is Christ. As we hear today in Ephesians, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord." And the "you" the scriptures speak of isn't just one former blind person, but all of us.

The disciples' question to Jesus reflects the common opinion of the day, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They presumed that because of either the man's or his parent's sin, God was punishing him. Even though we are modern and "advanced thinkers," it is not uncommon to hear people blame themselves or their parents for doing something wrong and receiving punishment, an infirmity or tragedy, from God. "What did I do wrong that God is punishing me so?"—is still asked by people in pain and misery. When we are suffering and at our most vulnerable, what an extra misery it is to believe that God is also against us! Indeed, that God is punishing us!

Jesus dismisses such theological speculation. He gets right to the point of his life and mission. Through the man's blindness God's healing presence will be felt. And, if people believe that the man's blindness is the result of sin, then Jesus' healing the man will prove to them that through Jesus, God is forgiving sin. Jesus' giving sight to the man has profound implications for all humans, for we are

all born into darkness. Just look around at the condition of our world—slaughter, torture, mayhem and division seem to rule so much of our human history. Is there any doubt about human blindness and our inability to see one another as members of the same human family and as children of God?

One of the shapes our blindness takes is shown in Jesus' closing statement to them. The Pharisees' blindness is profound for they claim privilege and priority in matters of religion and knowledge of God. Their hubris should raise caution flags for us church folk, especially those of us in leadership, lest we too find ourselves thinking the way they do, that we have an inside track to God, or a greater knowledge of God than others. The Pharisees think they have the answers, especially when they confront the former blind man. About Jesus, they say, "We know that this man is a sinner." Wrong! They refuse to accept the testimony of the man born blind when he attests to Jesus' coming from God. Their response to him, "You were born totally in sin and are you trying to teach us?"

The Pharisees are not even aware that they are blind. In fact, they are sure they can see and so Jesus tells them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains." The more profound darkness is to claim to have all the answers; or to be separate and not among those who need sight. The blind man's response to Christ is ours as well, "Who is he, sir that I may believe in him?" Adapted for our purposes we might pose the question this way, "Who are you Lord, that we might believe?" For we always are in need of more sight---more light on the subject!

We need to see better. We need to put fewer restrictions on our God and not say things like, "God would never accept a person like that." Or "God can't be present in that place, with those people." We cannot predict or define God's saving presence in the world. The Pharisees couldn't imagine that God was present in Jesus or that the blind man could discern the presence and actions of God better than they could. God is bigger and greater than any of us could imagine.

Don't we tend to see the presence of God in a beautiful sunrise; the birth of a child; the mountains; a summer rain on parched earth; a work of art; or in someone we love? True enough. But if, as Ephesians tells us today, we are "light in the Lord," then we must produce "every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord." Illumined by the light Jesus gives us we see what, on our own, we would miss. We now see family, friends and strangers in the light of our faith in Christ. We also see those often overlooked; those considered unimportant in the eyes of a world that claims to see. We might see, but do we

have vision? Can we “see” Christ in the least—the poor, hungry, unemployed and homeless? Can we see Christ in those who are often marginalized: teenage mothers, school dropouts, the underemployed, handicapped, gays, the severely ill and very old? The very ones our political leaders, and sometimes our church, pay less attention to, Jesus shines a light on and tells us, “Look again and see.”

After his healing, the former blind man did not find life easy. He was immediately met by opposition and hostility from the powerful Pharisees. In his encounters with them his spiritual sight, his understanding of who Jesus was, grew. (This story is similar to that of last week’s account of the Samaritan woman who matured in her awareness of Jesus’ identity as the story developed.) Under questioning the man’s statements about Jesus grew more insightful. First, to his neighbors, he refers to Jesus as, “the man called Jesus,” then, to the Pharisees, he says of Jesus, “He is a prophet.” On further questioning he seems to imply a growing acceptance of Christ when he says to them, “Do you want to become his disciples too?” Then he responds to Jesus’ question, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” with the response we make at this Eucharist, “I do believe Lord.”

This isn’t the story of just a blind person getting his sight. It is our story, we who, like the blind man at the end of the story, worship Jesus. Jesus begins his healing of the blind man by making clay with his saliva and smearing it on the blind man’s eyes. John is telling the story in a way that stirs up memory of Genesis (2: 4-7), when God forms the human from the clay of the earth and breathes into it to it a “living soul.” Jesus is doing the same for us humans who are born into a world made dark by sin. He is recreating us, giving us spiritual sight so that we can see, by his light, in the dark. When Jesus finishes his work he tells the blind man to go to the pool called Sent—that is what happens to us. We are sent into the world to witness what happened to us at our baptismal pool when Christ became our light.

What did happen to us as a result of our baptism? We were called by name and have met Christ in faith. Many times, since then life has tested that faith and in our response to those challenges we seemed to have been given deeper and stronger faith. Christ continues to touch our eyes and give us sight, mercy, compassion, strength and growing faithfulness. With the sight Jesus has given us, we have discovered courage in the face of death and even a willingness to suffer for our faith.

The religious authorities saw in Jesus only a Sabbath-breaker. The man born blind came to see much more—as we have. But the faith we have been given is not for us alone, instead we are “sent” to live what we have come to see in Christ—his

love for all and his fidelity to God's will.

## **IN MEMORIAM**

**Father Walter Burghardt, SJ** (July 10, 1914 - February 16, 2008).

Fr. Burghardt died peacefully in the Lord in Manresa Hall Infirmary, Merion Station, Philadelphia, PA. He authored countless theological essays and books. His area of expertise was the earliest Christian writers, the "fathers of the Church." He served on the Holy See's International Commission, edited "Theological Studies," taught at Catholic University and Georgetown.

But to a lot of us he was best known as a great homiletician and writer about preaching. He conceived the "Preaching the Just Word" workshops for priests and church ministers to effectively preach biblical social justice.

Preachers who heard him and knew him were both inspired by his eloquence and challenged to take very seriously our role as preachers of God's Word. Walter prepared his preaching meticulously and what I found most endearing about him was his honest sharing with his audience about what a challenging and difficult task he found preaching to be. Yet, he did it faithfully and all who have heard him preach or read his homilies are the richer for it.

## **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER**

Burghardt, Walter J., S.J. Preaching: The Art and the Craft. New York: Paulist, 1987.

Thirteen essays which share the author's 45 years of preaching experience. Well written, informative and imaginative, with honest reflections on his struggles during preaching preparation. Has a bibliographical essay and an annotated bibliography of those preachers, past and present, who have helped him in his preaching ministry.

## **QUOTABLE**

Admit it: The homiletic movement from Scripture through theology and prayer to the present liturgical moment is a frightening function, a dismaying task.... What is time-consuming and soul-searing in each homily's preparation is that I must (1) grasp the genuine meaning of a word as it emerged from the mouth of Jeremiah or the pen of Paul or the contemplation of a Johannine community, (2) touch it to the paschal mystery celebrated by the Church and (3) transform it so that the word takes on the personal and cultural clothes of this moment, of these believers. Here

is the agony of preparation, here its occasional ecstasy.  
---Walter Burghardt, S. J., page 14.

### REMINDER:

Fr. Chuck Dahm, OP has written short homilies for the Sundays of Lent. They have a strong social justice cast and each homily has an accompanying Prayer of the Faithful. Go to our "Preachers' Exchange" webpage and click on Justice Preaching. Or, go directly to:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com/justicepreaching.htm>

## JUSTICE NOTES

**"As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth."**  
(John's Gospel 9:1)

"The fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions, policies, and institutions is this: They must be at the service of all people, especially the poor".  
(US Catholic Bishops: Economic Justice for All)

"Standing with the poor begins with and introduces us into a new way of *seeing* the world around us. Making the *invisible visible* is our first step on the way to compassion." Fred Kammer, SJ: *Doing FaithJustice*. P.149.

In today's Gospel, Jesus heals a man blind from birth. Growing up, as most of us have in an affluent culture, we too are "blind from birth". When we see things differently, our new knowledge leads us to act differently. As "***children of light***" we "***produce every kind of goodness***". (Ephesians 5:8) But clear vision, which leads to knowledge and new ways of living in the world, is painful. Few of us have the courage to have our hearts broken by looking into the eyes of the poor and truly asking *why* they are poor and ***what part we have played in their misery***. It is hard to "see" with God's eyes. But that is what we are called to do. Our culture's preference for the "rich and famous" is enshrined in our public policies and national economic priorities, which continually find more funding for sophisticated weapons and less for services to the needy. Did you know?

America leads the industrial world in wealth disparity.

US Catholic Bishop members of *PaxChristiUSA* have written a statement about the immoral budget priorities, which place weapons about people. Read these Bishops' statement "***Bread not Stones***" at:

[http://www.paxchristiusa.org/news\\_events\\_more.asp?id=60](http://www.paxchristiusa.org/news_events_more.asp?id=60)

### **What I can do?**

1. Become informed about our national budget priorities and speak out against more money for weapons at the expense of essential services for the poor.
2. Call on your legislators to work to create an economy that values the meeting of basic human needs in a sustainable way over the accumulation of profits.
3. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or at Catholic Parish Outreach.

*Look into the eyes of a truly poor person and ask, "to see".*

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

### **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

John R. Elliott #0120038 (On death row since 5/4/94)

Wade L. Cole #0082151 (6/14/94)

Marcus Robinson #0348505 (8/5/94)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

**"Liturgical year A,"** which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

**"Liturgical years, A, B and C,"** reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process.

Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: [www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com)

and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>  
Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: [Jboll@opsouth.org](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto:jboll@preacherexchange.org)

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

### **DONATIONS**

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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