

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

Lent is a time of conversion.

In the light of God's word addressed to us on this Sunday morning I hear the Lord calling us to undergo a particular conversion: a change in the way we see things – not least the manner in which consider other people, but also, how we assess ourselves.

The question of vision – especially our perception of others – is already present in today's first reading.

We are told how Samuel *caught sight of Eliab* and was immediately impressed by his outward appearance. The Lord had to intervene, instructing Samuel: *Take no notice of his appearance or his height for I have rejected him; **God does not see as man sees; man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.***

What is drawn to our attention here is the need to move beyond basing our judgements upon outward appearances alone.

The call addressed to us is to allow ourselves to be guided by the Lord's approach when it comes to evaluating people.

Again and again the Sacred Scriptures make the point that the Lord looks at *what is in a person*. It is stressed that the Lord sounds the depth of a person's heart.

In the case of Eliab it is made manifest that the Lord doesn't allow Himself to be swayed by a person's apparent lofty stature. God looks for something else in a person. He looks to their attitude of heart. The Lord is impressed by and attracted to a person's lowliness, their humility and obedience; their present engagement in service and their willingness to do whatever more is asked of them for the good of others – even when this demands of them that they dare to risk their own life in the process. The unfolding of the story of David will show how Jesse's youngest son was willing to serve and ready to lay down his life in the process. He risked his life in combat with Goliath.

Our first reading from the Book of Samuel shows us that God's choice of Jesse's youngest son, the shepherd boy, David, took everyone by surprise. Samuel, who was called in God's name to make the choice of a successor to Saul as king of Israel, was led to fix on one whom his father Jesse had not even thought worth presenting to the prophet for consideration. We can also take it that David's brothers would never have dreamt of him being the man of God's choice either – after all, David still only a boy. Moreover, it is fair to think that David himself would not have not esteemed that he was prepared for the ministry he was called to fulfil.

The point to be grasped in this whole episode is that **the Lord obliged Samuel to change his regard and to modify his assessment.**

I believe that what God asked of Samuel – namely, to let go his own way of seeing things and assessing people – is something the Lord asks of each one of us. It seems to me that Lent is a favourable time in which to implore from the Lord the grace we need to undergo a conversion in this respect. **Lent is a time in which to ask the Lord to help us change the way we see things and not least when it comes to our evaluation of people – ourselves included.**

The story of God's choice of David underlines for us that the Lord judges people by their thoughts and intentions – what matters to the Lord is what is in a person's heart, their deepest self, the core of their being. It is not what one sees on the outside that is important; it is who a person is on the inside. Physical appearances can be deceptive, outward show no guarantee of how things are interiorly. God is concerned with humility and obedience. If it is this that the Lord is looking for in every person; it is also this that we should be on the look out for in others – and, before that, striving to be true to in ourselves.

Commitment to the Lord and a willingness to serve others – whatever the possible cost to our self –

these are the qualities that should guide our self-assessment and help us discern exactly where we stand when it comes to our response to God's call in our lives.

If all that matters to us is our self, if we cannot see beyond ourselves, then we can be sure that we are not situated as we should be in our relationship with God and with others.

Such spiritual short-sightedness is a common ill. How many of us fail to see beyond our own noses! How many of us can be so terribly blind to those around us!

All through Lent, in many of the Scripture passages we listen to, from both Old and New Testaments, the malady of spiritual blindness is drawn to our attention. The call addressed to us is an invitation to live this sacred season as a time of grace in which we allow ourselves to be healed of this spiritual sickness, because, by its very nature, this ill leads us to ignore the pitfalls into which we can so easily fall.

Today's gospel passage brings the question of spiritual blindness and the promise of healing from this affliction to the fore.

If at the outset of the story we read this morning attention is focused on the man born blind, the attention soon shifts to the spiritual blindness of those who looked on at Christ's healing work in this man and criticised it. The ill-will of the latter was a real concern for Jesus.

The place Jesus' critics hold in the whole episode of the blind man's healing is an invitation for us to consider the attitude of these religious people as much as the blind man whom He healed.

What today's gospel story reveals is that Christ came into this world to give sight not only to the physically blind but to the spiritually blind as well. He came to cure from their cecity those who foolishly imagined that they could see.

If in the story the man born blind had no problem admitting to the fact that he could not see – this was obvious to him – the proud onlookers, the religious men who criticised Jesus for healing this sufferer of his ill, totally denied their own lamentable state of spiritual blindness. To use the words of the psalmist, *they could see, but not perceive*. Their sarcastic question – *We are not blind too, are we?* – bears testimony to the fact that their pride held these men in denial. Their declaration here was self-accusatory – without them realising it to be so. Their statement bore testimony to their sin of spiritual pride. The onlookers declared that they could see perfectly well. Jesus' response to them should be noted: *If you were blind, you would have no sin, but since you say, 'We see', your sin remains*. Jesus made it clear to the religious people who scorned the blind man for his blindness and Jesus for healing him, that they condemned themselves by their harsh judgements. He pointed out to them that they hadn't enough humility to admit to their spiritual blindness. If only they would have humbled themselves, then Jesus would have healed them too by forgiving their sins. Christ would have overlooked their faults, for the Lord always sees beyond a person's brokenness and sin, ready to discern a heartfelt desire to be made whole. But, what could Jesus do for His critics as long as they refused to see that there was anything amiss within themselves and held back from asking for God's grace? There was nothing He could do for these people who were not ready to receive His help. That remains true in our own day. For us to receive the Lord's healing touch, we have to recognise our need for it. For any of us to move beyond spiritual blindness to sight, we must admit to our ill; we must accept that our sight fails us. We must own up to the areas of blindness which trip us up. Are we ready to do that?

Let's name just some of the stumbling blocks which have us fall into the pit and hold us bound in the ill of spiritual blindness...

Perhaps **self-righteousness** is the first and one of the greatest hindrances to our seeing clearly and also from experiencing salvation. Denial of our need to be *made right with God* can be the greatest obstacle to us experiencing the Lord's healing grace in our lives; it is also likely to make us quite harsh in the way we assess others.

Those who are blind to themselves are inclined to be foolish enough to imagine that they see clearly

when it comes to others. Elsewhere Jesus speaks of how they can recognise splinters in the eyes of those around them and fail to acknowledge planks in their own eyes. Of course *they* might be you and/or me!

Linked to self-righteousness is another great malady of those who think they know everything and that is **ignorance**.

How many of the problems of spiritual blindness we encounter in ourselves and others stem from ignorance! The truth is that many of us are so convinced that we hold the truth in hand – and can therefore cling to it and be certain of it – that we reject any idea of our need to enquire a little further into things; to open our minds and hearts to learn what we don't yet know.

We can have many ideas about the truth and yet never have encountered that One who is *the Truth* in His own person. Even though we may profess Christianity, we can be blind to Christ in our midst: Christ alive and at work within human experience – that of other people and, indeed, our own to begin with.

Cynicism is yet another great obstacle to our attaining spiritual insight, for it leads us to look at everything and everyone in a squinted way, with a sort of spurned regard.

Cynicism is inclined to harden our hearts and to lead us to live with a severely restricted field of vision – seeing everything from our own little corner, a self-centred perspective.

A cynical person will be a highly critical person; he or she will be someone who is largely devoid of trust and quite negative in outlook. Cynical persons' vision of reality will often be skewed. Cynical people are men and women whose hearts have become poisoned and embittered – usually through past hurts in their lives which have never been worked through properly, reconciled with and thus healed. Cynics are very self-defensive and harshly judgemental people. They are not at all positive in their assessments of others. They are hardly likely to be supportive, benevolent and trusting in regard to people around them; they won't be confidence-inspiring, nor will they be kind and generous in their dealings with others.

Evidently from what we read in both texts proposed to our meditation this morning **the seat of spiritual blindness, the place from which our vision is blurred, is the heart.**

The whole of the Bible makes this point, coming to this conclusion from various angles. I think it would be fair to say that from the Bible's perspective **spiritual blindness is a heart complaint:** a mixture of foolishness of heart and of hardness of heart.

In Biblical parlance and that of the great Christian tradition the heart is the centre of our being; it is who we are. Just as the tradition can speak of the *ear of the heart* so too we can think of *the eye of the heart*. In a well-known gospel passage Jesus speaks about how we look upon a person with the eye of our heart. The whole point of Jesus' teaching is that He wants all of us to see others as He regards them. We are told in the gospels how Jesus looked upon others: *He looked upon him and loved him*. This little phrase sums up Jesus' whole regard upon other people. Christ's regard upon others was and still is benevolent and well-intentioned; Jesus looked upon others with pity and compassion, with mercy and kindness.

Let us dare to think of today's gospel passage in its entirety with the challenge it presents to us. Let us think of today's gospel story not just as we are used to calling it – *the Good News story of the man born blind who was healed* – but also as the sad story of those who refused to recognise their blindness and by their supposed clear-sightedness actually condemned themselves to stay engulfed in darkness. Averted by this story, let us pray for the grace we need to welcome Christ's own vision of all things and every person – ourselves included.

During this Lenten season, which is a privileged time in which to welcome the Lord's healing grace, may we allow ourselves to be cured of the blindness that holds us bound.

Jesus was sent to bring Good News, to offer liberty to captives, to restore the sight of those blinded

by whatever it is that robs them of **the gift we could all ask for ourselves this morning: the gift of spiritual insight.**

Amen!