

## THE MAN BORN BLIND

You have heard me speak of my son Shawn on many occasions; of his trials with drugs, his conversion, his death. There is something else, however, of which you might not be aware, namely that his spiritual vision, his ability to see things from the heart, was often far superior to my own. I can recall a day when Shawn was 11 and the men of the family were experiencing together an adventurous trip to the East Coast and our nation's capital. On the day in question, we had decided to visit Philadelphia and tour the historic sights. First however, it was time for lunch and what better meal to seek out in the City of Brotherly Love than a Philly Cheesesteak sandwich! Our quest, in true keeping with my Dad's penchant for finding the worst part of any city, soon had us, on foot mind you, in the bowels of one of Philadelphia's poorer areas, with nary a Philly Cheesesteak to be seen. As we hustled along, I noticed, to my alarm, that Shawn had lagged behind. When he caught up to us, after my insistent blaring and bleating, I demanded to know what he had been doing. He said that he had noticed a man sitting on the sidewalk asking for money so he could buy food, so he had stopped and talked with him and then had given him all the money he had, probably close to five dollars. All of us were surprised, for not one of us had even noticed the man; far from being chastened, however, the wiser adults in our group were soon chastising Shawn for feeding a drug or alcohol habit. But Shawn knew better; he had seen the man and his need and had reached out, not with his wallet, but with his heart. It is ironic and moving to me, to now look back and realize that later in his own life Shawn himself would be that man sitting on a sidewalk, his life in tatters around him, whom many, like his own family, had simply failed to see, or in seeing, found clever ways to look beyond.

Shawn was no saint, but he saw things from his heart that even today I would most likely fail to notice. I was then and I remain pretty much today, a man born blind. We all are, even those of us who profess the Christian faith, for as disciples, we walk by faith and not by sight, which means we walk pretty much in darkness, seeing things, as Paul says, as through a mirror darkly. You might object that your baptism of faith restored your sight. And to that objection, I would draw your attention to today's Gospel reading from John. The unnamed

man born blind stands in for all of us here; that is why John doesn't name him. John, after all, is not recounting a particular healing, but is using this carefully crafted story to teach us something about the nature of true spiritual sight; a vision that must be completely rooted in Jesus Christ.

The story begins with a clear reference to baptism: Jesus makes clay and kneads it onto the man's eyes, then washes them clean with the waters of the pool called "Sent"; appropriately so, for Jesus then sends him forth to witness, to evangelize, to learn and grow in his new gift of sight. The man first encounters his own neighbors, identifying his healer only as 'the man called Jesus.' In fact, at this time of his journey, he doesn't even know where Jesus is. He is an observer only and although now enjoying the light of this world, still struggles to see things as they are. Next come the Pharisees in two increasingly intense dialogues, the latter being more in the nature of an interrogation. In the first, the man's faith has taken root to the point where he sees that Jesus must indeed be a prophet; as the heat of conflict rises, however, he comes to acknowledge that he himself is called to be a disciple of this 'holy man of God' and invites the Pharisees to join him. When his accusers, rebuffing his invitation, finally demand an explanation for Jesus' healing powers, he replies in exasperation: "If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see," words so stirring they have been immortalized in that great Christian hymn, "*Amazing Grace*". His faith ever deepening, the man born blind finally comes face to face with Jesus himself. Our Lord asks him, as he will ask us, for a profession of faith, saying, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Even now, the man's faith still begs for completion, for he replies, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him." This is the invitation for which the Lord eagerly waits, that moment when his disciples have opened their hearts enough to fully receive within them his divine presence. To Jesus' self-revelation, the man, with sight fully restored, addresses Jesus as Lord and falls to his knees in worship.

It is easy to lure ourselves into the belief that faith in Christ is a onetime deal; that vision comes instantly and easily. That has not been my experience, nor the experience, I suspect, of most Christians. Faith is hard work precisely because it is work undertaken in the dimness of partial sight. Moreover, we, like the Pharisees, have a presumption of sight that often allows us to place our lives on cruise control and feel that we have already arrived

at the goal of our faith, when in fact we have just begun. Indeed, rare have been the moments in my own life when I have not felt pretty much in control of who I am and where I'm going. The truth is, I know neither thing and have been consistently wrong about even where the next year's journey will lead me. I think we all now particularly feel that way with all the uncertainty surrounding the Coronavirus pandemic. Scary times; but surely a time when we need to attend all the more closely to our faith. For our faith has set us free, our faith has restored our capacity to see, our faith has shown us our end in Christ! Yet, we have much work to do. Shifting metaphors, it is fair to say that most of us here are still only in the early stages of awakening from sleep, or opening our eyes to behold God's gift of salvation in Christ. That we will so awake and that we will indeed come to see Our Lord face to face is the confident object of our faith. To this end, let us make Paul's hymn as quoted in his letter to the Ephesians our own:

**Awake O sleeper! Arise from the dead and Christ will give you light!**