4th Sunday in Lent 2023

When a memorable phrase is invoked, thoughtlessly, multiple times, it can easily become a “cliche” and thus lose its original impact. Yet, given the strange and challenging times we are in, not only here, but in so many parts of the world, it is worth recalling Seamus Heaney’s often quoted lines, as they express accurately the yearning of so many hearts. Heaney writes:

“History says, Don't hope

on this side of the grave,

But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of justice can rise up

And hope and history rhyme.”

Those words, “History says, Don't hope/ on this side of the grave”, we see made real on faces of the millions, for example, in Turkey and Northern Syria, in Ukraine, and in Afghanistan. We see it too in the faces of refugees, desperate for a decent way of life. So many in our sad, and often cruel, world long for that “tidal wave of justice”. Heaney’s words were much quoted twenty-five years ago at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, and here we are, still hoping that peace, reconciliation, and good government will rhyme with history. Surely, our most earnest prayer must be that our hopes, and those of the world, will cease to be mere dreams and become reality?

But then today’s Gospel passage lets us see that a “longed-for tidal wave/ Of Justice” has indeed risen up – and his name is Jesus Christ! In that Gospel extract we encounter a blind beggar, for whom, beyond all expectations, hope and history have rhymed. The Gospel narrates how Jesus, not only brought light into the darkness of this man life, but also brought the light of faith into his heart – his is a journey from physical blindness to vision, and from spiritual darkness to insight. The Gospel, by also giving us the reaction of the Pharisees and that of the blind man’s parents, enables us to reflect on our own life’s journey and our response to Jesus.

We can detect four stages in the journey of the man born blind. At first, he only knows that *“the man called Jesus”* healed him. – he wasn’t aware of Jesus’ identity. When questioned by the Pharisees, and asked as to who he thinks Jesus to be, he declared *“He is a prophet”.* Then when the Pharisees said of Jesus, *“we know that this man is a sinner”,* the man born blind declared *“God doesn’t listen to sinners”* therefore Jesus was from *“from God”*. Finally, when he met Jesus, and actually saw him for the first time, and is asked by him, *“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”,* he responded, *“I do believe”*. He saw not only with his eyes, but with his heart, and he saw life in a completely different way. His life has been given “a new horizon and a decisive direction” *(EG 7).* But this narrative isn't merely about a blind man who found vision, it is about you and me! Jesus asks you and me, *“Who do you say I am?” (Matt.16:15)*

The journey of the Pharisees was the very opposite to that of the man born blind - their blindness deepened as their rejection of Jesus grew. Isn’t it ironic that the one who started out blind ended up seeing; but those who claimed they could see, *“turned blind?*  The Pharisees found Jesus offensive because, according to their understanding, he had violated one of their religious commandments by healing the man’s blindness on the Sabbath. The valuable insight here is, that a sense of religious self-righteousness, can all too easily lead to narrow mindedness which is, in itself, a form of blindness. Perhaps we might ask ourselves; *“What is it that Jesus seeks to do for me which I am resisting?”*

The parents of the man born blind refused, out of fear, to comment on what Jesus has done for their son - in other words “they sat on the fence”. “Sitting on the fence” can hardly be called a journey - we recall the words of Jesus: *“Whoever is not with me is against me”*. Being uncommitted is, in the end, to journey away from Jesus. Perhaps these parents represent those, who nominally accept Jesus, but are not willing to accept the cost of following him. The Gospel views this as a denial of Jesus.

St. Paul, in today’s second reading, urges; *“be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth....have nothing to do with the futile works of darkness”*. The God-given way for a Christian to overcome the *“futile works of darkness”* is to benefit from the Sacrament of Penance. Keep in mind our Parish Penitential Service on Palm Sunday evening.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*those who believe in you, see!*

*They see with a light that illumines their entire journey.*

*Because it comes from you*

*who are the light of the world.”* **Amen**