

## A MIRACLE WITH EXTRAORDINARY SYMBOLS

1 Samuel 15. 1-13

Ephesians 5. 8-14

John 9. 1-41

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

As the ninth chapter of St John's gospel begins, our Lord has just returned to Jerusalem from Galilee so that he can attend what was called the Festival of Tabernacles.<sup>1</sup> This Festival,<sup>2</sup> along with the Passover and the Festival of Weeks, was one of the three major pilgrimage festivals of Judaism. It was observed for eight days and provided Israel with the opportunity to give thanks for the harvest. The Festival's main distinctive ritual was that the Jews were required to dwell in booths, in commemoration of God's protection of Israel during its wanderings in the wilderness.

Outside of building booths or tents made out of tree branches, the ceremonies of this Feast included drawing water from the pool of Siloam, which was poured over the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem; and each morning, the priests turned their backs to the rising sun to remind them of the time when their forefathers had turned away from the Lord and chased after idols. But all this was done with joy, to celebrate the gathering in of the harvest and to remember Israel's sojourn in the desert, when God dwelled in the midst of his people.

Now, Jesus brings a new perspective to these observances as he encounters a man who has been blind from birth. Christ and his disciples are just coming down from the Temple at the conclusion of the Festival. Our Lord sees the blind man and his

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jn 7. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Also called the Festival of Booths or *Sukkoth* (Hebrew). The Festival is described in Lev 23. 39-43. See also Neh 8. 13-18.

disciples enter into a theological discussion about his condition. They ask, ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’ That was a common belief in Jesus’s day; people thought (as some do today) that afflictions were God’s punishments for wrongdoing. But Christ doesn’t lend credence to such a notion. This man, he says, has been born blind so that God’s power might be made manifest.<sup>3</sup>

We now move from talk to action. Our Lord begins by breaking the law: he violates the Day of Rest that was appointed for the close of the Feast of Tabernacles. How? By spitting on the ground and making clay (this constituted work in the eyes of the religious authorities, who thought that if one day you are making a poultice to heal the blind, the next thing you know you’ll be making bricks; and there goes the Sabbath, right out the window). Nevertheless, Jesus places mud on the blind man’s eyes and sends him to wash in the pool of Siloam, which John takes pains to tell us means ‘Sent’. Do you catch the nuance? That’s more than just a play on words, referring to a pool to which people were ‘sent’. Recall what Christ said: ‘The very works that I am doing testify on my behalf that the Father *has sent me*. And the Father who *sent me* has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form.’<sup>4</sup> The Sent One has spoken; the blind man has heard; and it remains to be seen whether or not the blind man will behold the Sent One’s form.

There is another detail about this pool of Siloam that we should notice. I have already told you that as part of the observances of the Feast of Tabernacles, each day a priest went down to the pool, drew a container of water and carried it back up to the Temple. The priest poured the water onto the altar of the Temple as a libation which was left to run down to the valley below. This scene is reminiscent of a vision seen by the prophet Ezekiel,<sup>5</sup> who saw water flowing out of the Temple toward a desert

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<sup>3</sup> We must be careful not to think that God ‘willed that the man be born blind’. The man was born blind (as others have been) because of the fallenness of creation; and fallen creation is responsible for afflictions like blindness, disease, natural disaster and (ultimately) death. Our Lord came to usher in God’s kingdom on earth; and as he does so, he will reveal the power of God and his power to reverse the effects of a fallen world.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jn 5. 36-37.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Ezek 47. 1-12.

land to bring healing and new life. Healing and new life: this water from the pool of Siloam also makes us think of baptism. St Peter, recalling another incident when people were saved by water, wrote: ‘Baptism, which this prefigured, now *saves you* – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.’<sup>6</sup>

The blind man is at the pool. We must imagine him bending his neck, not only in obedience to our Lord’s voice, but also so that he can lower his face down to the water and wash the mud away from his eyes. Suddenly, synapses which have never fired before burst into life. Before the blind man can see, or before he can comprehend what it is he is seeing, he must first discern the wild, dizzying, indescribable experience of perceiving *light*. And right at this moment, we might remember something else that Jesus said: ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.’<sup>7</sup> I wonder, what did the man see first, the phenomenon of electromagnetic radiation, or the light and life of Christ dawning in himself?

And what is the next thing he sees, even if he doesn’t recognise it as such? It must be water, of course; his face is bent over a pool, after all. Could we blame him for wondering, ‘what is this?’ To taste water is one thing; to hear its silvery trickle or burbling, rushing sound is still another; but to *see it* and *understand it* is an entirely different thing altogether. At that very instant, perhaps our Lord reminded the man that ‘...the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’<sup>8</sup>

But before the man born blind can get back to Jesus, he falls into the hands of his neighbours, who drag him off to see the Pharisees. This is not initially done out of

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Pet 3. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Jn 8. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jn 4. 14.

malice, but out of a desire for answers. The neighbours, like Christ's disciples, thought that the man was blind because of sin; and now they want to know what really happening. God seems to be reversing his judgement on sinners!

Unfortunately, the interview with the Pharisees turns into an interrogation. Repeatedly, Pharisees ask the man and his stunned parents how he was healed, if he was healed, and if he was even blind to begin with? The man's explanation progresses from relating facts as they happened to a deeper profession about who it was who healed him. The Pharisees, however, do not want to 'see' anything beyond their own comprehension. Finally, the man is expelled from their presence.

The man who was born blind now returns to our Lord. At long last, the man *sees* Jesus, and he *really sees him*. Whose 'form' does the man behold? None other than the form of God incarnate. The man believes in Christ, the Son of Man, and worships him. He sees that the God who long ago accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert,<sup>9</sup> has now come to us; and he is 'God with us'.

Today, as we celebrate Laetare Sunday and have the opportunity to relax from our Lenten rigours, let us ask God to give us fresh eyes: fresh eyes of faith that will enable us to see his Son *for who is really is*. Our Lord is indeed with us; and he still works in our midst, revealing his power and his grace. On this Laetare Sunday, we truly have reason to rejoice!

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf 2 Sam 7. 4-6.