

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading - 1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a**

The books of Samuel were originally one book and actually form a continuation of the deuteronomistic history of the people of Israel. It also marks a turning point in the history of God's people as Samuel is the last of the judges. Under increasing pressure from the Philistines, Samuel struggles to keep Israel faithful to Yahweh. Defeats in battle and the failure of Samuel's sons to follow his example, convince the people that Israel needs a new kind of leadership; a king. Samuel thought this was wrong, but God told him *"Grant the people's every request. It is not you they reject, they are rejecting me as their king. <sup>8</sup> As they have treated me constantly from the day I brought them up from Egypt to this day, deserting me and worshiping strange gods, so do they treat you. <sup>9</sup> Now grant their request; but at the same time, warn them solemnly and inform them of the rights of the king who will rule them."* <sup>10</sup> Samuel delivered the message of the LORD in full to those who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup> He told them: *"The rights of the king who will rule you will be as follows: He will take your sons and assign them to his chariots and horses, and they will run before his chariot. <sup>12</sup> He will also appoint from among them his commanders of groups of a thousand and of a hundred soldiers. He will set them to do his plowing and his harvesting, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup> He will use your daughters as ointment-makers, as cooks, and as bakers. <sup>14</sup> He will take the best of your fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his officials. <sup>15</sup> He will tithe your crops and your vineyards, and give the revenue to his eunuchs and his slaves. <sup>16</sup> He will take your male and female servants, as well as your best oxen and your asses, and use them to do his work. <sup>17</sup> He will tithe your flocks and you yourselves will become his slaves. <sup>18</sup> When this takes place, you will complain against the king whom you have chosen, but on that day the LORD will not answer you."* <sup>19</sup> The people, however, refused to listen to Samuel's warning and said, *"Not so! There must be a king over us. <sup>20</sup> We too must be like other nations, with a king to rule us and to lead us in warfare and fight our battles."* <sup>21</sup> When Samuel had listened to all the people had to say, he repeated it to the LORD, <sup>22</sup> who then said to him, *"Grant their request and appoint a king to rule them."* Samuel thereupon said to the men of Israel, *"Each of you go to his own city."* (1 Samuel 8:7-22).

Samuel then anointed Saul, who doesn't work out too well, then God tells him to anoint David. It is of David's selection that we hear today.

**<sup>16:1b</sup> The LORD said to Samuel: "Fill your horn with oil, and be on your way. I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have chosen my king from among his sons." <sup>6</sup> As they came, he looked at Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is here before him." <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel: "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him. Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the**

LORD looks into the heart." <sup>10</sup> In the same way Jesse presented seven sons before Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any one of these." <sup>11</sup> Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" Jesse replied, "There is still the youngest, who is tending the sheep." Samuel said to Jesse, "Send for him; we will not begin the sacrificial banquet until he arrives here." <sup>12</sup> Jesse sent and had the young man brought to them. He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance. The LORD said, "There-anoint him, for this is he!" <sup>13</sup> Then Samuel, with the horn of oil in hand, anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and from that day on, the spirit of the LORD rushed upon David.

This whole story shows that the choice was God's and not man's. Man's choice would have been the firstborn. In order to emphasize the authority behind this anointing, David is anointed with all his brothers as witnesses so no one can say "I didn't know." Eliab was the firstborn and has difficulty accepting David's selection as can be seen in 1 Samuel 17:28.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading - Ephesians 5:8-14**

The destination of this epistle has caused some discussion. Although the manuscript tradition preponderantly supports the title "to the Ephesians," a number of early manuscripts read simply "to the saints and faithful who are in Christ Jesus." It is also interesting that not a single member of the Ephesian community is greeted or mentioned – It was Paul's practice to extend such greetings in his letters. The uncertainty over the epistle's destination has occasioned a number of conjectures: It is the epistle to the Laodiceans alluded to in Colossians 4:16; It is Paul's last message to the Church; It was prepared by an anonymous author as an introduction to a group of Pauline letters; and It was a circular letter, written at the same time as Colossians and Philemon and directed to the communities of the province of Asia. This last explanation is considered to be the most probable.

All this discussion aside, Ephesus was in Western Asia Minor, established by Ionian Greeks in the 11<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It possessed the famous Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and was a center of magical practice. The Church was established there early and was visited by Saint Paul. It is the place where Saint John is reputed to have written his gospel, and he may also have been buried there. An impressive basilica was built over his supposed tomb. According to one tradition, the dormation or assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary occurred on a hill near the city. Early in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. it was occupied by the Turks and all that remains now is a small village called Selcuk which is located near the extensive ruins of the ancient city.

Today's reading comes from the section of the epistle which gives exhortations to worthy conduct.

**<sup>8</sup> For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.**

The contrast of darkness and light is the contrast of opposition to God and membership in the Christian community.

“The darkness is being turned into light. There is not, as some heretics argue, a nature so alienated that it cannot receive salvation. ... Those who receive salvation – the righteous – are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Those who refuse, the unrighteous, are in consequence called darkness. ... The difference and distance between one and the other is clearly seen by their own fruits.” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 386), *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 3,5,8]

**Live as children of light,<sup>9</sup> for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth.<sup>10</sup> Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.<sup>11</sup> Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them,<sup>12</sup> for it is shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret;<sup>13</sup> but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,<sup>14</sup> for everything that becomes visible is light.**

What is a fruitless work (vain deed)? One which lacks substance or worth. Galatians 5:19-21 lists some of them.

“He has said, ‘you are light’. Light exposes what takes place in darkness. Insofar as you are light your goodness shines forth. The wicked are not able to hide. Their actions are illuminated as though a lamp were at hand.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392-397), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 18,5,11-13]

**Therefore, it says: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."**

This is probably a fragment of an ancient Christian hymn used in a baptismal liturgy (see also Ephesians 2:5-6; 3:9; Isaiah 60:1).

### **Gospel - John 9:1-41**

Last week we heard of the Samaritan woman at the well. This week we hear of the man born blind. Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (September-October of the year before His crucifixion) in chapter 7. In Chapter 8 he is still in the vicinity of Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives and in and around the Temple. Our reading for today encompasses all of chapter 9. In chapter 10, Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication (Lights/Hanukkah) which occurs in November-December.

We can deduce then that our reading for today takes place in or very close to Jerusalem, probably in October or November of the year prior to His passion. This reading contrasts Jesus (the light of the world) with the Pharisees (blindness).

**<sup>1</sup> As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"**

It was a firm Jewish belief that every affliction was a punishment for sin, and that the sins of the parents could be punished in their offspring (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). The disciples

did not necessarily think that the man might have sinned before birth – in the foreknowledge of God, the punishment might have been inflicted for a sin that was to follow. This was their reasoning in asking the question.

**<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him."**

Divine providence has determined that this man is to serve as the occasion of a work of God.

**<sup>4</sup> We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day.**

Jesus now identifies the part He plays in fulfilling the divine purposes. In performing God's work in respect to this man, He will be offering a divine light. The "we" reminds us all that we also have the duty to do the works of God.

**Night is coming when no one can work.**

Light is opposed to spiritual darkness.

**<sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."**

This is another example of the "I am"(Yahweh) theme used by John and others. In John 8:12 (during the Feast of Tabernacles) Jesus spoke the same words. Like the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites by night, Jesus guides us through spiritual darkness. There is always a link between the words and works of Jesus.

**<sup>6</sup> When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva,**

Spittle was commonly believed to have medicinal properties.

**and smeared the clay on his eyes,**

Literally, "anointed the clay on his eyes"

**<sup>7</sup> and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" (which means Sent).**

This was, perhaps, a test of faith (see 2 Kings 5:10-14). The pool at the southern extremity of Jerusalem from which water was brought for the libations of the Feast of Tabernacles.

**So he went and washed, and came back able to see.**

The essence of the sign for John is not simply that sight has been restored, but light is given to one who never had it.

**<sup>8</sup> His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?" <sup>9</sup> Some said, "It is," but others said, "No, he just looks like him." He**

said, "I am." <sup>10</sup> So they said to him, "(So) how were your eyes opened?" <sup>11</sup> He replied, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went there and washed and was able to see."

This is a symbol of baptism and spiritual enlightenment. In the early Church, baptism was called "enlightenment." As is so often the case, the words and deeds of Jesus cause immediate dissension. Siloam means "sent" and Jesus was sent by the Father.

<sup>12</sup> And they said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I don't know." <sup>13</sup> They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees.

The Pharisees are the arbiters of what is religiously proper, the dissension is communicated to them. Their complaint is against Jesus' technical violation of the Sabbath.

<sup>14</sup> Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath. <sup>15</sup> So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see." <sup>16</sup> So some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, because he does not keep the sabbath." (But) others said, "How can a sinful man do such signs?" And there was a division among them. <sup>17</sup> So they said to the blind man again, "What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

Recognition of who Jesus really is, is coming to the man born blind. When first asked, he had replied simply "that man they call Jesus" (v11). Now, he calls Him a prophet.

<sup>18</sup> Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. <sup>19</sup> They asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?" <sup>20</sup> His parents answered and said, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. <sup>21</sup> We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for himself."

The Jews had summoned the man's parents to verify that he had indeed been born blind. While affirming the undeniable, the parents refuse to commit themselves concerning his present state for the reason given in the next two verses.

<sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue. <sup>23</sup> For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; question him."

When John states that confession of Christ was punished by excommunication from the synagogue he may well be accommodating the language to the situation of later Christian times when this punishment was inflicted on Christian Jews, including perhaps some of John's own readers. The putting out applied in Jesus' time to those who defended Him would have been of a less formal nature. Formal excommunication is believed to have begun ca. A.D. 85, when the curse against the "minim", or heretics, was introduced into the "18 Benedictions".

**<sup>24</sup> So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give God the praise!"**

A solemn appeal to tell the truth in its Old Testament form (see Joshua 7:19)

**We know that this man is a sinner."**

This is the affirmation the Jews seek: If, as he claims, Jesus has cured him, it can only be at the expense of having violated the Sabbath law, thereby constituting Himself a sinner.

**<sup>25</sup> He replied, "If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see."**

The man refuses to debate with the Jews on their own ground concerning what constitutes a sinful violation of the Sabbath. He testifies to the one thing that is undeniable.

**<sup>26</sup> So they said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" <sup>27</sup> He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"**

The demands for repetition of the man's story are a study in frustration. They are seeking to attack the story on some detail or another. The man is fully aware of their intentions and makes no attempt to be diplomatic. By his accent on the "too" he reminds the Jews of the unpleasant fact that Jesus is gathering disciples despite their efforts.

**<sup>28</sup> They ridiculed him and said, "You are that man's disciple; we are disciples of Moses!"**

In their reply, the Jews, zealous for the Law according to their own conceptions bring out the contrast (see John 1:17).

**<sup>29</sup> We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from."**

Moses has spoken with God, but Jesus' origins are unknown. The Christian knows that Jesus is the one who speaks what He hears from His Father and is the only one who has seen God.

**<sup>30</sup> The man answered and said to them, "This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. <sup>32</sup> It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything."**

The man becomes quite bold in his answers. This gives us an example of the Christian who must testify fearlessly to the truth. Invoking a common biblical theme (Isaiah 1:15; Proverbs 15:29) he proves with irrefutable logic that Jesus could be no sinner but must be from God. The only Old Testament cure from blindness is found in Tobit 11:7-13, but Tobit was not born blind.

**<sup>34</sup> They answered and said to him, "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out. <sup>35</sup> When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"**

Having been rejected by the Pharisees, Jesus offers him the opportunity to make the ultimate act of faith.

**<sup>36</sup> He answered and said, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"**

The man does not ask about the meaning of "son of man", he asks rather that Jesus point him out.

**<sup>37</sup> Jesus said to him, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he."**

In words reminiscent of the story last week (the Samaritan woman at the well), Jesus points to Himself.

**<sup>38</sup> He said, "I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.**

Having progressed from man, to prophet, he now recognizes Jesus' true identity and addresses Him with the title of Christian faith.

**<sup>39</sup> Then Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind."**

The effect of the judgment brought about by Jesus' call to faith is that many, like the Pharisees, falsely believing that they already possess the light, reject the revelation of God.

**<sup>40</sup> Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" <sup>41</sup> Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains.**

The Pharisees correctly recognize that Jesus' words apply to them. If only they realized the extent of their own blindness, there would be hope that they would seek for light. What makes their case hopeless is their smug complacency.