

Reconciliation homily, March 10, 2021. (Is. 58:6-10; Mt. 25:31-46)



One of the ways sin is defined in the four gospels, is that it starts off with an inability, or a failure, to **see**. There is something about our seeing, when we sin, that gets screwed up right from the get go. It reminds me of a story in John's Gospel, that we often hear during Lent, of how Jesus gets in trouble for curing a blind man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, who value the keeping of the law above

everything else, cannot enter into the man's joy of finally being able to see. That miracle rightly called for a celebration, but that never happened. The Pharisees' concern was, "Who authorized this? And who authorized this on the Sabbath?"

Instead of rejoicing in this man's new-found freedom, they try to discredit the man and call Jesus a blasphemer. The whole episode ends with Jesus saying something very poignant to the Pharisees. He says, "**If you were blind** (physically), **you would have no sin** (nobody would fault you for not seeing). **But now that you say, 'We see'**" (which is an obvious lie), **your sin remains**" (Jn. 9:41). They were blind to the pain of this man's life-long struggle with darkness, and they were blind to his new-found joy of finally being able to see. Similarly, our sin is connected to seeing what we want to see and pushing away anything we do not want to see. And the result is, like the Pharisees, we miss out on so much joy. The celebration, once again, gets discarded.

The key to seeing properly, which is the key to overcoming sin and growing spiritually, has very little to do with *looking up* and almost everything to do with *looking down* and *looking around*. Let me explain. Jesus, in the gospels, tells a story of a rich man who every day passed by a beggar named Lazarus, who was seated by the gate to the rich man's house. When they both eventually die, the poor man, Lazarus, goes to his reward in heaven while the rich man perishes in hell. In short, what was the rich man's sin? His sin was that he did not respond to the poor man's needs. And it all started with seeing, or, more precisely, not seeing. Had he looked down into the eyes of the poor man just once rather than looking over him, the story would have had a very different ending.

Similarly, in the Ascension story, the disciples were looking up, hoping to get a last glimpse of Jesus as he returned to heaven. Suddenly this story, with such a perfect and idyllic ending, is interrupted by two men, two party crashers, who suddenly appear and say to the apostles, ***“Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking up into the sky?”*** You’re looking in the wrong place! Their sin, and our sin, is that we keep looking up into the heavens when we should be looking on earth into the eyes of our brothers and sisters in need. Maybe that is why Jesus feels so compelled to say in the gospels, ***“Go and learn the meaning of these words: Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice.”*** Sacrifice makes you look up, hoping against hope that what you have to offer God, up there, will be found acceptable, if for no other reason than to get on, or stay on, God’s good side. Mercy, on the other hand, makes you look *down* and *out* into the face of God hidden in your brothers and sisters.

There is an expression that says, “Some people are so earthly-bound, they are no good for heaven. And other people are so heavenly-bound, they are no good to anyone on earth.” The gospel story of the Last Judgment, that we heard tonight, has a sudden and abrupt twist in it, and it comes in the opening lines. It starts with us looking up to the Son of Man seated on the throne of glory surrounded by angels. Wow! Who wouldn’t want to look up at this? This celestial, sentimental, idealistic, heavenly scene, within two lines, becomes “down to earth” and abruptly realistic. All of a sudden God, the king, has us shifting our focus from heaven, up there, to earth, down here, to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the naked, the stranger. The One in royal robes is the naked one. God has become incarnate. And here we feel the shock of the Incarnation. I have a hunch that the Last Judgment story--the story of God forever being present in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked--is a Christmas story. The point of Christmas is not to keep looking up at the star of Bethlehem. The only purpose of the star is to get you to the manger so that you can stop looking up and finally look down into the face of the incarnate God. Here comes the other twist in tonight’s gospel story: ***“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?”*** Their sin was looking up when they should have been looking down; they were obsessed by some fantasy in the sky rather than noticing a flesh and blood presence on earth.

There is another expression in the spiritual life that goes like this: *when the student is ready, the teach appears*. But here's the catch--the Teacher is always present and always appearing; unfortunately, we are not always ready. Our eyes are not open to see what is sometimes right in front of our noses. We missed the opportunity to see what is important to see. The imperative in the Christian faith and in almost all other world religions is: Wake up! Open your eyes, the Kingdom of God is within you. The patterns of life are trying to wake you up. That's why patterns are repeatable, so that we eventually get it.

These cursed eyes that miss so many opportunities are, at the same time, blessed eyes. As Jesus says, "whoever gives a cup of water in my name, because they belong to Christ, will by no means lose their reward." Can we see in the thirsty a person who belongs to Christ? A person who is the Christ? Who would have thought that it was just that simple? However, before you can offer the cup of water, you first have to see the one who was thirsting. So blessed are your eyes because they see; many prophets before you wanted to see what you see in me but never saw it.

Tonight, is not the night to curse ourselves for missed opportunities. Tonight, is the night to see the truth through the eyes of the Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. This Jesus is the one who sees us, loves us, forgives us and rejoices with us. And if this forgiveness and love has to break all the rules of the Sabbath to do so, so be it.

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