

Fourth Sunday of Lent A- *"I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."*

March 19, 2023.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..." These are the greatest opening lines in any novel written in the English language. They are the first lines of Charles Dickens' masterpiece, ***A Tale of Two Cities***. The novel contrasted the insanity of the reign of Terror following the French Revolution with the generosity of those who reached out beyond their own concerns to care and love for others.

The people who heard or read the beautiful ninth chapter of the Gospel of John in this Sunday's long Gospel (John 9:1-41) of the Man Born Blind, knew that they were also experiencing the best of times and the worst of times. The Gospel of John was not completed until the end of the first century. By then, Peter and Paul, all of the other apostles, perhaps with the exception of John himself, had all been killed, many, like Bartholomew, were tortured to death. Even the pagan historian Tacitus wrote that the Christians persecuted under Nero suffered so horribly that many Romans felt a deep compassion for them. And yet, through all the terrors the people who read John had experienced a deep joy that though they were following Christ to death they were also joining him in eternal life. Christians supported each other, cared for each other, and, above all, held onto their faith that, as the Gospel concludes in John 20:31 ***these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.***" It was the worst of times, yet it was the best of times.

The subject of this Sunday's drama, the Man Born Blind, had experienced the worst of times and was continuing to experience them. He had been born blind. He had never seen his mother and father. There was nothing for him to do in the world except beg, which he did every day by the Pool of Siloam. Perhaps, his parents brought him there everyday with the hope that he might make a little to help pay their bills. Or maybe his parents had put him out of the house once he reached a certain age. The man lived in a dark world. Then Jesus came and healed the man. He gave him sight. Now the man was attacked by the Pharisees for daring to say that this Jesus was a prophet. He was thrown out of the Temple, shunned by society. The man did not need the Temple any more. Nor did he need society. He had Jesus. As the drama progresses he grows in faith until at the end he worships Jesus. He was living in the best of times. The Saviour himself intones the theme of this meditation: ***I am the light of the world***. The powerful symbolism of light often finds expression in the Scriptures. It is often appealed to in the Psalms, the confession of faith of the ordinary people in old Israel – God's Word is 'a light on the path' of life (Ps 119); Yahweh himself is Israel's 'light and salvation' (Ps 27). The contrast between light and darkness is often appealed to in the New Testament, as in this Sunday's second reading from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians (5:8-14).

The tragedy of spiritual blindness is vividly exemplified in the refusal of the Pharisees to be open to what was confronting them in the signs given through the ministry of Jesus - as their empty reasoning is made to look foolish by the straightforward honesty of the man they are trying to intimidate. 'You can be his disciple', they declare in their frustration, 'We are disciples of Moses'. And, as he responds to their arguments, pointing out that his miraculous healing shows that Jesus is surely 'a prophet' and that he must have 'come from God', the man who was born blind is progressively 'enlightened' – 'to be finally welcomed by Jesus into the company of his disciples, making his confession, ***Lord, I believe you are the Son of Man*** – ' the very title that was to seal the fate of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. As he urges the Ephesians to a life of authentic discipleship, Paul contrasts a life of 'goodness, right living and truth' with the 'shameful' things done in the dark. The story of the

'man born blind' and his courage in the face of great odds reminds a community with deep roots in old Israel of the challenge of genuine discipleship.

Johnny was the extrovert in the community for the disabled in the assisted living unit. He always plunked himself down right in the middle of where the action was: in a chair by the mailboxes, at the entrance to the dining room, or right in front of the TV in the sitting room. He knew everyone by name. "Good morning Miss Lucy. Your knees must be hurting you today." "Hello there, Harry. Susan was looking for you, and, my, but she was mad." "Watch out, Charlie, someone spilled water there, and the floor might be slick." Johnny was born blind. But he didn't miss a trick. He saw more with his blindness than most of us see with our two good eyes. He saw with his ears, and his gut, and his heart. Sometimes "blind" is not really blind and "seeing" is not really sight. All of us are born blind in one way or another. Some of us have blindness of body: a crippling disease, cancer, diabetes, or bad bones. Some of us have blindness of heart, and that is a terrible blindness. The blind of heart can't love another beyond a superficial level and usually can't even love themselves. The blind of heart often live lives corroded with addictions to material things, possessions, and work, to cover up the empty hole. And worst of all is blindness of the soul, which wraps all the rest of life in gloomy darkness.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus notices our blindness. Jesus sees. Jesus invites us to see with our very blind eyes, with our wounds and brokenness. Jesus uses our weaknesses as grace. When tragedy of one form or another strikes us, we often ask why. In this Sunday's Gospel reading, the crowd also asks why. "Whose fault is this? What did they do wrong to deserve this?" Jesus's response is that the blindness was an opportunity for the works of God to be manifested. We look at our physical and mental blindness as a curse. And indeed Jesus does heal the blindness. Yet at the same time, the blindness is a door to grace. It is the sick who need the doctor. It is the blind who need to see. It is we who need the redemption, the transfiguration, the Burning Light. Light is a symbol of life with Christ and darkness is the religious image of sinfulness, shameful deeds and unbelief. Each of us is meant to be a beacon of light showing others how to live and giving direction to their lives by our good example. We should all live out our baptismal commitment to let the light of Christ shine through our behaviour. The outreach ministries of the Franciscan friars in San Francisco are beautiful examples of transforming darkness into light, blindness into sight, making God manifest in the underbelly of humanity. *They offer the light of human connection – friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood - to any and all who come to the door. Among other services offered are medical care, social services, clothing, employment assistance, addiction treatment, and programs of advocacy engaging local government and civic leadership.* Each Franciscan has a ministry out there in the real world where God's broken ones live. They hand out clean clothing to the homeless. They cook, serve and do dirty dishes serving the street people meals. They visit the prostitutes in the brothel areas to be a listening ear of hope and unconditional love. They provide shelter for families whose loved ones are in the hospital and can't afford motels. They run a crisis line outreach to the suicidal. They offer Bible study to the homeless and many more. Their work is astounding, hidden, and holy. We have a similar charitable organization in Canada, the St. Felix Centre in Toronto that was started by the Felician sisters in the 1930s and is still running. It provides compassionate care for every person, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, culture, or history. The Centre is committed to providing support to some of the most marginalized individuals in Toronto's downtown core. It offers services and programs in a safe, welcoming, and respectful environment inclusive of all religions, genders, cultures, and abilities. All peoples are treated with respect and dignity, regardless of circumstance, in the Felician-Franciscan tradition. As Pope Francis said in the conclusion of his March 5, 2023 Angelus: ***"How many luminous faces, how many smiles, how many wrinkles, how many tears and scars reveal love around us! Let us learn to recognize them and to fill our hearts with them. And then let us set out in order to bring the light we have received to others as well, through concrete acts of love (cf. 1 Jn 3:18), diving into our daily occupations more generously, loving, serving, and forgiving with greater earnestness and willingness. The contemplation of God's wonders, the contemplation of God's face, of the Lord's face, must move us to the service of others."***

Having been called to walk as children of light we must keep praying: “Lord, that I may see.”