

Lent 4th Sunday (A)

19th March 2023

'Lent John texts II: Man Born Blind'

1Sam 16: anointing of David Ps 22: *my head you have anointed with oil ...*
Eph 5: *you are light in the Lord* Jn 9: 1–41: cure of the man born blind

I don't know if any of you have seen online a 5-min video clip of the winner of a Channel-4 programme from last week where a 13-yr-old wins the competition for amateur pianists, *The Piano*? The extraordinary thing about the winner, Lucy, is her being blind from childhood, autistic, and with severe cognitive and communication difficulties. She lost her sight after cancerous tumours in both eyes as a little girl, and her communication *is* her music. Her piano playing, despite all the severe challenges, is that of a genius; she has to learn her piano pieces by memory from the outset. When she played her finals piece by Debussy, she wowed the professional pianist, Lang Lang, who was judging the event, and the audience was visibly moved, with not a few teary eyes; at its end the Royal Festival Hall crowd leapt to its feet in appreciation. It's truly a very moving thing, to watch her play with such delicacy, and in the face of such odds. "Why was she born blind?" One might almost answer, with the words of the Gospel, "She

was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in her." When a girl whose disabilities might have come to define her, in the sight of many, is revealed to be a girl of such extraordinary talent — way beyond that of most of us — it's a salutary reminder that we must be very careful in what we think, whom we pigeon-hole, and whether we allow our first impressions to rule us.

The blind man in today's 2nd great long Johannine Gospels of Lent (Jn ch. 9), is a victim of so much neglect and prejudice, and even abuse ... but His saving encounter with Jesus leads him not only from blindness to sight, but from spiritual blindness to seeing the light, i.e. to faith in Christ. As last week with the Samaritan woman, we see that Our Lord models for us an approach to personal encounters that helps us to recognise our sins and to live more like Him. Let's take, once again, then, our cue from the Gospel text, and address a few specific areas in which we could be failing: an examination of conscience, in other words, to help us make the necessary preparation for a good Lenten confession.

1. Firstly, and most obviously, are the **latent prejudices** that can easily accompany our treatment of anyone marginalized. Our Lord's straightforward compassion for the man born blind is in contrast to the Pharisees' despisal of him, as they repeatedly brand him "a sinner." (And because Jesus has converse with this man born blind, the Pharisees even brand Him "a sinner" too!) We just need to be very careful in our judging others, especially to avoid the hypocrisy of "not practising what we preach." Let's never forget that we are all sinners! That's not to say, of course, that we condone everyone's actions, or imitate everyone's lifestyle, or could possibly agree with everyone's opinions (some of which are wild and wrong), but that we do adopt a primary outlook of acknowledging that we are also sinners, and that our own sinfulness demands a gentle treatment of others, also, in their human frailty.
2. More specifically, the man born blind has had to resort to the ignominy of **begging**. And so arises the question of our relationship of love to the various beggars and homeless people of our own area here. How are we treating them? As Bp John reminded us on Ash Wednesday, starting with a word of kindness and finding out someone's name is maybe

the best thing. The question of giving cash is a complex one; but kindness through buying some food or other provisions is never wasted. I choose to give monthly to a Catholic London charity, too, that works with the homeless day in, day out, helping them off the street and back onto the rungs of the ladder of accommodation — a worthy option for Lenten almsgiving, I would suggest. And then there's our very own SVP Soup Run that goes out to the homeless often on a Thursday — think of joining them.

3. One might be taken aback by the parents' harsh attitude to their blind son in the course of the Gospel account. Let's not forget, **family relationships** can be complex and precarious — yet we are constantly called in faith back to the serious duty of the 4th commandment, "Honour thy father and mother." Never be dissuaded from a constant commitment to maintaining and building up your families — parents, siblings, children (one day), cousins — as best you can. No family is perfect, no parents or siblings either; yet they are in great part a *gift* to us from the Lord, our blood relations, and we should do our very best to honour them with devoted good will, with care and attention, with regular communication, and with patience to the end of their days.

4. The blind man's parents are specifically mentioned as being **reluctant to speak of Jesus's** involvement in their son's healing. They wanted to avoid conflict, and so ran away from a proclamation of the truth, even though they were aware of it, as St John records. Are there settings in which we have quite deliberately hidden our Christianity, our belief in Jesus as the one true Christ and Saviour, in order to make for an easy life? Have we denied Jesus — openly, or simply by our silence — and not taken the opportunities the Spirit presents us with of speaking, gently, but lovingly, of faith in our Blessed Saviour as being utterly central to our lives?
5. Then, finally, the matter of **giving thanks**. Such a neglected part of our prayer life, sadly, at times. Look at how the blind man — at the second encounter with Jesus, after his being driven away — responds to Jesus by falling down and worshipping Him. Is that the basic attitude of our lives? — falling down and worshipping Him, as we should do? Do we give thanks every day for our blessings, Jesus's blessing of us in *so many* ways? Let's not sin by omitting a deep personal gratitude for God's giving us life, faith, and so much else besides.

So: they're a few pointers to help us maintain this vigilance over our consciences, through the incisive word of God — the divine words of Jesus's Gospel encounter — and to continue making of this Lent a deep and prayerful reflection on our attitudes, our witness, our care and compassion for others. Is it good enough? Is it everything (yet) that the Lord would truly call us to? No, almost certainly not ... but He comes to us with a loving directness and the offer of grace, especially in Confession, to do much better. It is only ever in His light that we shall truly see, and not stumble along, blind and unseeing ...

“You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of the light, for the effects of light are seen in complete goodness, and right living, and truth.”

(Eph 5: 8–9)