

Homily on Seeing with the Eyes of Faith

The Sundays of Lent in Year A always give us those long and wonderful discourses from St John's Gospel. We have documentary evidence of them as part of the Lenten liturgy in the fourth century, being read as candidates were prepared to be reborn in Baptism at Easter, and as the faithful recalled their own journey in faith and gift of new life. Just as the characters in these Gospels grow in faith and understanding so also those preparing for Baptism. And we are invited to do the same.

The Gospel and liturgy of this fourth Sunday pick up on the theme of Jesus as "the light of the world" and of seeing and not seeing. The man born blind is seen by Jesus, receives his sight but does not recognise the one who gave light to his eyes. He sees physically but not yet with the eyes of faith. As the story goes on, he comes to recognise that Jesus has come from God and then towards the end finally 'sees' Jesus for who he really is and worships him.

The same theme of distinguishing outward appearances from inner realities plays out in the first reading, telling of the election of David. Samuel is sent to the house of Jesse. His eye falls first on the most likely candidates in the household – presumably those who are mature, fit and strong. Only once he has exhausted those is he forced to enquire about the boy who matters so little to everyone that he is out looking after the sheep, invisible and forgotten. (Remember that as shepherds lived with their sheep they would have been rather smelly – no need for encouragement to socially distance there!) Samuel's problem was that he saw the outward appearance and not the inward reality.

Yesterday I watched a recording of one of the many private masses that are now taking place and was struck at how empty it seemed. Usually the masses we see on a screen have lots of people and a sense of occasion. This just seemed to reinforce the sense of isolation that so many are feeling at present. I was minded of the famous and disastrous advertising for Strand cigarettes (1959). It was way before my time but it is a classic case study of marketing that was badly let down by the visual image. The strap line was "You're never alone with a Strand", but the image was all about a man, standing very much on his own on a wet and gloomy night in 1950s London.

That great hymn of St Thomas Aquinas *Adoro Te Devote*¹ speaks of the way in which, even in our regular celebration of Mass or adoration of the Blessed Sacrament we have to look beyond the outward signs with the eyes of faith. It is that presence of the Holy Spirit in us that we call faith that enables us to recognise what is outwardly bread and wine as Jesus our friend and saviour present among us, body and blood, soul and divinity. When the outward signs are even thinner than they usually are we need to ask the Father to strengthen our faith that we may look beyond the outward signs of isolation and lonesomeness and recognise the true reality of God-with-us and of our deep communion (*koinonia*) with him and with all the saints.

Fr Jonathan

Fourth 'Laetare' Sunday of Lent, 2020

¹ Recent scholarship has confirmed the Authorship of this text, even if many hymn books still only 'ascribe' it to St Thomas.

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*Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore,
masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
see, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.*

*Seeing, touching, tasting are in thee deceived:
how says trusty hearing? that shall be believed;
what God's Son has told me, take for truth I do;
truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.*

*On the cross thy godhead made no sign to men,
here thy very manhood steals from human ken:
both are my confession, both are my belief,
and I pray the prayer of the dying thief.*

*I am not like Thomas, wounds I cannot see,
but can plainly call thee Lord and God as he;
let me to a deeper faith daily nearer move,
daily make me harder hope and dearer love.*

*O thou our reminder of Christ crucified,
living Bread, the life of us for whom he died,
lend this life to me then: feed and feast my mind,
there be thou the sweetness man was meant to find.*

*Jesu, whom I look at shrouded here below,
I beseech thee send me what I long for so,
some day to gaze on thee face to face in light
and be blest for ever with thy glory's sight.*

Amen.²

² Trans. Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ (1844-1889)