

Here we are at the mid-point of the Lenten season - Lent (if you include Palm Sunday) has six Sundays, and Lent ends (obviously) just before what would be the 7th Sunday - Easter Day. So the 4th Sunday of Lent is half-way through Lent – not a bad day to take stock, to think about where we've come from and how we got here.

The First Sunday of Lent set's the table, as it were: we see Jesus struggling to decide how he should proceed; should it be by making means-to-an-end expedient choices, or by maintaining his integrity as a devout follower of Yahweh? Obviously the answer was the latter, or we wouldn't be here today!

Then comes Nicodemus. There are two striking things about Nicodemus that are central to this Lenten journey: **first**, he came from the very highest of the high elites of 1st. Century Judean Judaism – he was a member of the Council, the ultimate insider. And, **second**, he either didn't 'get it' about Jesus, or he didn't want to 'get it' about Jesus. Perhaps his curiosity got the better of him but what he discovered represented a fundamental challenge to his lifestyle as an elite Jew. "You have to start over," Jesus said to him – "from the very beginning." I guess if you have a lot to give up, it's harder than if you have little or nothing – clearly Nicodemus has a lot to lose, so he goes away, and he stays away until at least after Jesus' crucifixion and death.

And then, there's the woman at the well. As a Samaritan Jew she's an 'outsider' as far as Judean Jews are concerned; as a woman she's an "outsider" as far as male Jews – Judean and Samaritan – are concerned. She 'gets' Jesus right away! She doesn't care there's no chaperone, she doesn't care that he's Judean and she's Samaritan – she only cares that she wants to buy what he's selling because what he's selling is all about a new spiritual identity that respects her and treats her as an equal, even though she's a woman and a Samaritan. She goes away, but only to bring back others so they can meet this person who offers insights that transformed her, and – she recognizes – have the ability to transform all her friends too.

Today we meet the man born blind. While he's a male Judean Jew – a status that would have made him an insider – his blindness makes him ineligible to be a Temple priest, and impossible for him to read from scripture in a Sabbath service. Practically speaking it means that able-bodied work was also outside of his abilities, so he ended up as a beggar. While he was certainly not beyond the compassion of any Jew, his infirmity definitely made him an outsider with regard to the sorts of roles and responsibilities within 1st Century Judaism. So what – or who – caused his blindness?

Everyone around Jesus gets all worked up about this blind man's sin; to us that seems odd, but not to 1st Century Jews, since they believed that to be visibly physically impaired meant you were under a judgment from God because you obviously had sinned – or, anyway, someone had sinned and you were paying the price for that sin. The only real question for that culture is "who?" Look at Jesus' response to his own disciples: "WRONG QUESTION!" He said to them, and then, John tells us, he restore's the blind man's sight

As a result of his new sightedness, an argument breaks out among the phariseest! Don't think that just because the Pharisees question Jesus' actions as law-breaking that they either hate him or even that they disagree with him. Within 1st Century rabbinic circles, everyone loved an argument! It was how theological questions got thrashed out. Thus, some Pharisees say "Doesn't healing on the Sabbath mean the one who does the healing is breaking the Law?" It's a legitimate and reasonable question that practicing Jews wanted to discern an answer for, not least so that if it *is* breaking the law they can avoid doing that themselves. And, logically, these Pharisees said, if you're a law-breaker then that isn't very holy of you, since it's God's law you just broke, making you a sinner. Notice that in reply, it's other Pharisees (yes, *other* Pharisees, not Jesus) pushing back, saying "wait a minute what he did was a divine act, a Godly act, and there's no way a sinner could do that – so he must be from God!" Great argument!! Very Jewish!

Now everyone's really enjoying themselves! Next question, please! "Was he *really* blind from birth?" Yup! And, finally, "Sure you can see, but it can't have been because of Jesus, 'cos he's a sinner, so God must have acted in some other way to heal you, right?"

And the Man Born Blind demolishes that argument: "Look, I really don't care about these arguments between all of you; all I know is that I was blind, and now I'm not, and Jesus did it! Deal with it!" That crosses a line – the one where professionally trained experts get huffy when a non-professional points out that their lavishly constructed argument is naked. Result? He's thrown out of the synagogue. I guess none of us likes to be challenged in those areas where we think we know more than the other!

And that brings us to the final scene which is a real contrast: the outsider seeks to worship God in Jesus. And it dawns on some of the pharisees (probably the ones who sided with the blind man, since they seem to have left the synagogue when he was expelled) that behind the physical healing of the blind man is a more profound story about spiritual blindness. This is progress for them! And I think that Jesus' reply is intended humorously to these pharisees because they're more sympathetic to the blind man and to him. So his comment is intended to show them how their argument about blindness and sin might be as much about them as the blind man. It's almost as if he's saying to them that "we're all in the same boat; we're all in this life together, so perhaps talking about the sin of others actually puts you on more shaky personal ground than you might wish!" How very human! We do that all the time.

This fascinating very contemporary story of the man born blind advances our Lenten journey. Once again an outsider gets it right away, and rejoices in the discovery! And, finally, some of the insiders get it too - and that's very good news for us, who are the insiders in our culture.

Today's gospel invite us to try and shed the spiritual blinders that so often prevent us from seeing God's presence in the world around us, and God's presence in others, especially in those people that our culture suggests we should dismiss without a second thought. That's an invitation to a place of humility as well as a place of recognizing our own blindness.

How might we – as "insiders" in our culture – fail to see what's really going on for those who are outsiders? What's it really like to be homeless? How can we support them in ways that aren't

demeaning, that maintain their dignity? How can we fulfil our own vows to live in a compassionate, loving way? These are mid-Lent's questions to us today.