

Historic Commentary



Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year A

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 9 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

Ambrose: You have heard that story in the Gospel where we are told that the Lord Jesus, as he was passing by, caught sight of a man who had been blind from birth. Since the Lord did not overlook him, neither ought we to overlook this story of a man whom the Lord considered worthy of his attention. In particular we should notice the fact that he had been blind from birth. This is an important point. There is, indeed, a kind of blindness, usually brought on by serious illness, which obscures one's vision but that can be cured, given time; and there is another sort of blindness, caused by cataract, that can be remedied by a surgeon: he can remove the cause, and so the blindness is dispelled. Draw your own conclusion: this man, who was actually born blind, was not cured by surgical skill but by the power of God.

Caesarius of Arles: We have just heard that Jesus gave sight to the man who was blind from birth. Do you wonder? Jesus is the Savior. He did something in keeping with his name, for by his kindness he restored what he had given to a lesser degree in the womb. Now when he made his eyes less powerful, surely he did not make a mistake, but he deferred it for the miracle....Behold, why Christ delayed when he made the eyes less powerful in the womb. Do not think that the parents of that blind man had no sin and that the blind man himself, when he was born, did not contract original sin; because of the fact of original sin even very little children are baptized. However, that blindness was not due to the sin of his parents or due to the sin of the blind man, but in order that the glory of God might be made manifest in him. For when we are born we all contract original sin, and still we are not born physically blind. That blind man was prepared as a salve for the human race. He was bodily restored to light, in order that by considering his miracle we might be enlightened in heart.

Chrysostom: They were led to ask this question because our Lord had said above, when he healed the paralytic, “See, you are well! Sin no more.” Thinking from this that the man had been paralyzed because of his sins, they say, “That other person was paralyzed because of his sins, but what would you say about this man? Had he sinned? How can you say that, since he was blind from birth? Have his parents sinned? Neither can one say this because the child does not suffer punishment because of his parents.” The same way we ask how it can be when we see a child suffering, this is how the disciples spoke here, not so much asking for information as being perplexed.

Augustine: Was he then born without original sin, or had he committed no sin in the course of his lifetime?... Both this man and his parents had sinned ... but that sin itself was not the reason why he was born blind.... Our Lord gives the reason why ... “That the works of God should be made known in him.”

Cyril of Alexandria: We do not believe that the soul previously existed; nor indeed can we think that it sinned before the body, for how can someone sin who has not yet been born? But if there has been no sin or fault preceding the suffering, what then shall we allege as the cause of the suffering? Truly, by our minds we cannot comprehend those things that are far above us. And, I should advise the prudent and myself above all to abstain from wishing to thoroughly scrutinize them. For we should recall to mind what we have been commanded and not curiously examine things that are too deep, or pry into those that are too hard or rashly attempt to discover those things that are hidden in the divine and ineffable counsel alone. Rather, concerning such matters we should piously acknowledge that there are certain wondrous things that God alone understands. At the same time we should maintain and believe that since God is the fountain of all righteousness, God will neither do nor determine anything whatsoever in human affairs or in those of the rest of creation that is unbecoming to God or differs at all from the true righteousness of justice. Since therefore it is fitting for us to be affected in this way, I say, that the Lord does not speak dogmatically when he says “that the works of God should be made manifest in him.” Rather, he says it to redirect the questioner in another direction and to lead us from things too deep for us to more suitable ones.

Cyril of Alexandria: Here Jesus is saying, “Why do you ask questions that are better left unsaid? Or why, leaving what suits the time, do you hurry to learn things beyond the capacity of people? It is not a time for such curiosity,” he says, “but for intense work. I

think it is more appropriate to pass by such questions and instead zealously execute God's commands."

Augustine: After the resurrection of the living and the dead, when he will say to those placed at his right hand, "Come, you blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom," and to those at his left, "Depart into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels," then shall be the night when no one can work but only get back what he has previously done. There is a time for working, another for receiving; for the Lord shall render to every one according to his works. While you live, do something if you are to be doing anything at all. For then that appalling night shall come to envelop the wicked in its folds. But even now every unbeliever, when he dies, is received within that night: there is no work to be done there. In that night was the rich man burning and asking a drop of water from the beggar's finger. ... Unhappy man! When you were living, that was the time for working. Now you are already in the night in which no one can work.

Ephrem the Syrian: And he brought forth the light from the dust, just as he had done in the beginning, when there was a shadow of the heavens. "Darkness was spread out over everything." He gave a command to the light, and it was born from the darkness. Thus also here, he formed clay from his saliva, and he supplied what lacking in creation, which was from the beginning, to show that what was lacking in nature was being supplied by his hand.

Augustine: What is that night in which, when it comes, no one shall be able to work? Hear what the day is, and then you will understand what the night is. But how shall we hear what the day is? Let he himself tell us: "As long as I am in this world, I am the light of the world." See, he himself is the day.... The natural day is completed by the circuit of the sun and contains only a few hours. The day of Christ's presence will last to the end of the world, for he himself has said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

Irenaeus: He healed others by a word.... But the Lord bestowed sight on the one who was blind from birth—not by a word, but by an outward action. He did this neither casually nor simply because this was how it happened. He did it this way in order to show it was the same hand of God here that had also formed man at the beginning. And therefore when his disciples asked him why he had been born blind, whether by his own fault or his parents', Jesus said, "Neither this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God might be

manifested in him.” The work of God is, after all, the forming of man. He did this by an outward action, as Scripture says, “And the Lord took clay from earth, and formed man.” Notice here too how the Lord spit on the earth, and made clay and smeared it on his eyes, showing how the ancient creation was made. He was making clear to those who can understand, that this was the [same] hand of God through which man was formed from clay. For what the creating Word had neglected to form in the womb, this he supplied openly. He did this so that the works of God might be evident in him, and so that we would now seek for no other hand than that through which humanity was formed. Nor should we seek another Father, knowing that the hand of God which formed us in the beginning, and forms in the womb, has in the last times sought us lost ones out. He is gaining his own lost sheep and putting it on his shoulders and joyfully restoring it to the fold of life.

Irenaeus: As, therefore, we are formed in the womb by the Word, this very same Word also formed sight in the one who had been blind from his birth. In this way, he openly showed who it is who forms us in secret, since now the Word himself had been revealed to the world. It also made known the ancient formation of Adam and how he was made, and through what hand he was formed—indicating the whole [of Adam’s creation] by showing us a part [of it]. For the Lord who formed sight is he who has formed the entire person, and in doing so, carried out the will of the Father. But in respect to that formation in men and women that took place after Adam—when humanity fell into sin—there was a need for the washing of regeneration. This is why the Lord said to the man to whom he had given sight, “Go to Siloam and wash.” In this way, he provided both his physical reformation and his regeneration which comes through washing. And this is why, when he washed, he came back seeing. He would come to know his creator and humanity would come to know him who has given us life.

Ephrem the Syrian: For Siloam did not open [the eyes of] the blind man, just as the waters of the Jordan did not purify Naaman, but rather it was the command [by our Lord] that brought the healing. Also, it is not the waters of our atonement that bring purification; rather, it is the names invoked over it that produce atonement for us.

Augustine: See how he became a herald of grace. See how he preaches the gospel. See how, once he is endowed with sight, he becomes a witness. That blind man testified, and the ungodly were troubled in their hearts because they did not have in their own hearts

what they saw in him.

Chrysostom: Do you see how boldly the beggar speaks with the scribes and Pharisees? It shows how strong truth is and how weak falsehood is. Truth, though it grasps only ordinary people, makes them to appear glorious; falsehood, even when it is among the strong, shows them to be weak. What he says is like this: you do not pay attention to my words; therefore, I will no longer speak or answer you when you question me continually to no purpose. You do not want to hear in order to learn but so that you can lay insults over my words.

Cyril of Alexandria: He who had just received sight and had been miraculously freed from his old blindness was quicker to perceive truth than those who had been instructed by the law. See how through numerous and wise arguments he demonstrates the utter inferiority of the Pharisees' opinion.

Augustine: Of course God listens to sinners. But the man who said that had not yet washed the face of his heart in Siloam. The sacrament had already taken place in his eyes, but the benefit of grace had not yet been achieved in his heart. When did this blind man wash the face of his heart? When, after he had been thrown outside by the Jews, the Lord brought him inside into himself. You see, he found him and said to him, as we heard, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" And he answered, "Who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him?" He could already see him, certainly, with his eyes, but with his heart? Not yet. Wait for it; he will see in a moment. Jesus answered him, "I am, I who am talking to you." Did he hesitate? He washed his face immediately. After all, Siloam was talking to him, "which is translated as 'the One sent.' " Who is the one sent but Christ who frequently asserted, "I do the will of my Father, who sent me"? So he himself was Siloam. The man blind in heart approached, heard, believed, worshiped, washed his face and saw.

Basil the Great: Worship follows faith, and faith is confirmed by power. But if you say that believers also know, they know from what they believe; and vice versa, they believe from what they know. We know God from his power. We, therefore, believe in him who is known, and we worship him who is believed.

Augustine: That is why, when the Pharisees who were listening to what he was saying, themselves said, "We are not blind too, are we?" They were obviously like the one who

had gone up to the temple and was telling God, "I thank you, because I am not like other people, unjust, adulterers, rapacious," as though to say, "I thank you that I am not blind but can see, unlike other people of the same sort as this tax collector." What did those ones say? "We are not blind too, are we?" And the Lord answered them, "If you were blind, you would not have any sin. Now however, because you say 'We can see,' your sins remain." He did not say "your sin occurs" but remains. You see, it was already there; because when you do not confess it, it is not taken away but "remains."

Chrysostom: In this passage he speaks of two recoveries of sight and of two types of blindness: one sensory and the other spiritual.... But they were intent only on the sensory things and were ashamed only of sensory blindness. And so, in order to show them that it would be better for them to be blind than seeing as they do, he says, "If you were blind, you would have no sin," ... your punishment would be more tolerable.... "But now you say 'We see,' " but you do not see at all. He shows that what they considered as so great and praiseworthy actually brought them punishment instead. At the same time, he also consoles him who was blind from his birth concerning his former maimed state. And then he speaks concerning their blindness. For he directs his whole speech toward this purpose, that is, so that they cannot say, "We did not refuse to come to you because of our blindness, but we turn away and avoid you as a deceiver." And there is also a reason the Evangelist adds, "And some of the Pharisees who were with him heard these words." He wants to remind us that those were the very persons who had first withstood Christ and then wished to stone him. For there were some who only followed in appearance and were easily changed to the contrary opinion.

John Calvin: Vs 2. Rabbi, who hath sinned, this man, or his parents? In the first place, as Scripture testifies that all the sufferings to which the human race is liable proceed from sin, whenever we see any person wretched, we cannot prevent the thought from immediately presenting itself to our minds, that the distresses which fall heavily upon him are punishments inflicted by the hand of God. But here we commonly err in three ways. First, while every man is ready to censure others with extreme bitterness, there are few who apply to themselves, as they ought to do, the same severity. If my brother meets with adversity, I instantly acknowledge the judgment of God; but if God chastises me with a heavier stroke, I wink at my sins. But in considering punishments, every man ought to begin with himself, and to spare himself as little as any other person. Wherefore, if we

wish to be candid judges in this matter, let us learn to be quick in discerning our own evils rather than those of others.

The second error lies in excessive severity; for no sooner is any man touched by the hand of God, than we conclude that this shows deadly hatred, and we turn small offenses into crimes, and almost despair of his salvation. On the contrary, by extenuating our sins, we scarcely think that we have committed very small offenses, when we have committed a very aggravated crime.

Thirdly, we do wrong in this respect, that we pronounce condemnation on all, without exception, whom God visits with the cross or with tribulation. 253 What we have lately said is undoubtedly true, that all our distresses arise from sin; but God afflicts his own people for various reasons. For as there are some men whose crimes he does not punish in this world, but whose punishment he delays till the future life, that he may inflict on them more dreadful torments; so he often treats his believing people with greater severity, not because they have sinned more grievously, but that he may mortify the sins of the flesh for the future. Sometimes, too, he does not look at their sins, but only tries their obedience, or trains them to patience; as we see that holy Job – a righteous man, and one that feareth God, is miserable beyond all other men; and yet it is not on account of his sins that he is sore distressed, but the design of God was different, which was, that his piety might be more fully ascertained even in adversity. They are false interpreters, therefore, who say that all afflictions, without any distinction, are sent on account of sins; as if the measure of punishments were equal, or as if God looked to nothing else in punishing men than to what every man deserves. Wherefore, there are two things here that ought to be observed: that judgment begins, for the most part, at the house of God, (1 Peter 4:17;) and, consequently, that while he passes by the wicked, he punishes his own people with severity when they have offended, and that, in correcting the sinful actions of the Church, his stripes are far more severe. Next, we ought to observe that there are various reasons why he afflicts men; for he gave Peter and Paul, not less than the most wicked robbers, into the hands of the executioner. Hence we infer, that we cannot always put our finger on the causes of the punishments which men endure.

When the disciples, following the common opinion, put the question, what kind of sin it was that the God of heaven punished, as soon as this man was born, they do not speak so absurdly as when they ask if he sinned before he was born. And yet this question, absurd as it is, was drawn from a common opinion which at that time prevailed; for it is very

evident from other passages of Scripture, that they believed the transmigration (μετεμψύχωσις) of which Pythagoras dreamed, or that souls passed from one body into another. Hence we see that the curiosity of men is an exceedingly deep labyrinth, especially when presumption is added to it. They saw that some were born lame, some squint-eyed, some entirely blind, and some with a deformed body; but instead of adoring, as they ought to have done, the hidden judgments of God, they wished to have a manifest reason in his works. Thus through their rashness they fell into those childish fooleries, so as to think that a soul, when it has completed one life, passes into a new body, and there endures the punishment due on account of the life which is already past. Nor are the Jews in the present day ashamed to proclaim this foolish dream in their synagogues, as if it were a revelation from heaven.

We are taught by this example, that we ought to be exceedingly careful not to push our inquiries into the judgments of God beyond the measure of sobriety, but the wanderings and errors of our understanding hurry and plunge us into dreadful gulfs. It was truly monstrous, that so gross an error should have found a place among the elect people of God, in the midst of which the light of heavenly wisdom had been kindled by the Law and the Prophets. But if God punished so severely their presumption, there is nothing better for us, in considering the works of God, than such modesty that, when the reason of them is concealed, our minds shall break out into admiration, and our tongues shall immediately exclaim, "Thou art righteous, O Lord, and thy judgments are right though they cannot be comprehended."