

Lent 4
2/03/2008

Mark the Evangelist

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

The blind receive their sight while those who see are made blind

Mud: soft sticky matter formed from mixing earth and water. In terms of the history of symbols, **Mud** represents the primal matter from which humanity was made. It joins the mother-earth principle with water, the principle of change and transformation.

In common parlance we frequently make use of the image of **Mud**.

Here's mud in your eye: is a cheerful good wish expressed before having a drink.

Mud also refers to allegations or information used against another, hoping it will stick and spoil their argument or their reputation. And to be **dragged through the mud** is to be publicly denigrated. If someone's **name is mud**, that person is in disgrace or seriously unpopular.

The one person in today's gospel who you could imagine saying with joy and zest: "Here's mud in your eye" is the beggar at the centre of the story. He was born blind and, according to the beliefs of the day, was deemed to be the child of sinners. There was no hope for him but he miraculously received his sight. There is more than a miracle here. The **mud in his eyes** was an epiphany: an experience of God's presence that evolved in stages to the fullness of faith. And in this process old ideas about sin and forgiveness were completely overturned.

The blind man's journey towards faith can be tracked by looking at how the conversations reveal a gradual awakening as to who Jesus is. When first asked about his new sight he simply says: **the man Jesus** did it. Later he is questioned again and he says of Jesus: **he is a prophet**. In the third act of the drama the religious leaders question the source of Jesus' power. The man rebukes them, saying: **if this man were not from God, he could do nothing!** The source of healing is something they should have understood, but we know how it ends. They hear these words as criticism from a reprobate underling, and cast him out from the synagogue. Finally, when Jesus found the man born blind and declared himself to be the Son of Man, the Messiah, the man says: **Lord, I believe!** And bowed in worship.

From "the man Jesus" to "Lord I believe" we see a process of deepening insight, which begins with the opening of the eyes and concludes with the understanding of the heart. At the same time those who should have known better were blind to the clues. "You don't mean to say we are blind?" they asked. Despite their religious training they were unable to perceive the presence of God at work. In fact they did all they could to make the man's name mud, to drag his family through the mud, and to criticize Jesus. What had happened destabilised their power base and upset their theological rationale. The new thing God was doing in their presence remained unacknowledged and was strongly resisted. Their paradigms of belief had become

chains that shackled their faith rather than doorways to freedom and life. They found it impossible to contemplate a forgiveness of sins that reached beyond what they knew, which is why although they have eyesight, they are totally lacking in inner vision. Because of their legalism and rigidity Jesus' harshest word is for them. His coming has made them blind.

Some suggest John's Gospel was written at a time of savage bitterness between the Johannine Christians and the parent community of the synagogue. If this is so, we could read this story as a parable of the journey of the first Christians whose faith in Jesus led them to be expelled from the synagogues. With this in mind it is interesting to notice how after the healing Jesus leaves and is not seen again until the man born blind is thrown out of the Synagogue. There is a pattern here, which is like the pattern of the Resurrection appearances in John. Jesus comes to his ostracised and struggling disciples. The initiative is with him, and this is so with the man born blind. Jesus comes to shepherd his people into life and faith. Because he lives, so do they. And because he comes out to meet them, they who had nothing suddenly had everything.

It is clear from all that happens in this story that the journey of faith is one of struggling to be open to who God is for us in this man Jesus Christ. This is no small task. For the man born blind it was perfectly clear what had happened to him but the fourfold naming of his new reality demonstrates that faith is a jigsaw puzzle that slowly comes together. There is a process of evolution. The words we need to speak about the sacred are not given to us all at once. But they are given to us.

In this story Jesus mixed dirt, the primal matter from which humanity was made with water, the principle of change and transformation. This action suggests a joining of Spirit and Flesh, the result of which was an act of healing that transcended previous understandings of sin and forgiveness. Only the power of God was able to do that.

As we continue our Lenten journey towards Easter we are more aware than usual of the fact that, as a result of this healing and many other similar actions, Jesus' name became mud. He was ostracised and cast out. But even though the darkness strove against him, it could not overcome the gift that was in him. The man born blind stands as a sign that in Jesus God chose to give us life, in unexpected ways, through unexpected people in unexpected places. In this knowledge we may safely go forward on our Lenten pilgrimage, and look with hope and eager anticipation towards the joy of Easter morning. Thanks be to God. Amen.