

**“Windows on God”**

*A sermon given by Rev. Paul-Gordon Chandler on January 28, 2006 at the installation in St. John’s Church/Maadi, Cairo of nine new stained glass windows on the Biblical stories of Egypt done by artist Debra Balchen.*

**Introduction**

Our Gospel reading is about having eyes to see, but not really seeing.

It reminds me of how a seascape painting by the artist Henri Matisse was once hung upside down in the Museum of Modern Art in New York—and that was left that way for a month and a half. 116,000 viewers strolled past *Le Bateau*, upside-down, admiring it without comment; seemingly unaware it was upside-down, before it was re-hung correctly.



Our Gospel reading is of the famous story of a blind man who is healed by Jesus, whose sight is restored.

It takes place in the city of Bethsaida, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee—a city actually named after Caesar Augustus’ daughter.

And this is a story that brings to a close the first part of Mark’s narrative of the life of Christ—it is right in the middle of the Gospel of Mark.

In the first half of Mark’s Gospel, he records a collage of stories of spiritual blindness and misunderstanding on the part of both Jesus’ disciples and the religious leaders of his day.

And this miracle story begins to actually turn the tide in Mark’s telling of Christ’s life, for after this, the disciples seem to see more and more of the picture, of who Jesus really is, and the focus is instead on the sharpening of their spiritual vision.

This remarkable miracle story is only recorded for us in Mark’s Gospel—it is not found in the other Synoptic Gospels, Matthew or Luke. And in the Scriptures, wherever you have an “only”

occurrence, it is usually recorded for us for a very special purpose--put there by the author for us to take special notice.

And therefore it most obviously has something critical and profound to teach us.

**I. In looking at the story, more than just a display of God's healing, it is clear that Mark inserts this miracle of the blind man being given sight to communicate something far deeper.**

He is actually describing the spiritual journey we are all on.

Mark places this miracle after a cycle of stories that stress the disciples' spiritual blindness and misunderstanding, and immediately after the episode of the disciples not seeing what Jesus was trying to communicate-- when Jesus asked them, "Do you still not understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see...?"

And Mark places this miracle story just before both the great spiritual revelation Peter finally has of who Jesus is--where he says "You are the Christ, the Messiah", and also of the incident known as the Transfiguration, where the disciples see and enter a spiritual dimension as never before.

By putting together the story of the blind man receiving his sight and of the disciples gaining spiritual insight, Mark is emphasizing here the importance of spiritual "sight" or "seeing".

Critical to all this is that this story actually records the blind man's sight coming in stages--with Jesus gradually giving him his sight--and it is the only miracle story in the Gospels to speak of Jesus' healing as proceeding in stages.

After Jesus puts his hands on his eyes, the man first sees people that he says look like trees. Then with a second touch from Jesus, he sees clearly.

Elsewhere, in all Jesus' other miracles, many more difficult than this, Jesus heals completely all at once.

Obviously, Mark is intending us to understand this healing in stages as a process like that of spiritual revelation—of gaining spiritual sight.

By the gradual healing of the blind man, Jesus is showing how spiritual sight develops—the spiritual journey—from lack of sight, to partial or blurred sight, to our spiritual sight ever increasing, until that day where as St. Paul says in our Epistle reading when we will someday see God “face to face”—seeing all things clearly.

As Vincent Van Gogh described our spiritual pilgrimage so beautifully; “We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk or journey from earth to heaven”

So much of our experience of seeing God in the present however is as Paul describes in our Epistle reading when he says, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror” [or ‘through a glass darkly’]

This is illustrated in a fascinating book titled *Space and Sight* by Marius von Senden, about the first people in the world to undergo successful cataract surgery---all blind from birth, they suddenly received their sight and then were interviewed about what they saw.

Their stories are strange and moving, and they describe a world we no longer see, the way a newborn or an extraterrestrial might upon seeing it for the first time. One newly sighted girl was so stunned by the radiance of the world that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she finally opened them she saw only a field of light against which everything seemed to be in motion. She could not distinguish objects, but gazed at everything around her, saying over and over again, “Oh God! How beautiful!”

The journey of faith is a gradual illumination of the spiritual, of seeing God more and more clearly.

Everything in the healing of this blind man in our story hinges on “seeing”. While in English some of the words used for sight are the same here, in the original Greek there are eight different words used for nine instances of seeing—just in three verses in our Reading!

We also are told that the blind man eventually “saw everything clearly” (vs 25). This is a statement of “double entendre” as in the Greek this literally means “to see into”—so it is inferring spiritual perception.

In other words, it is about opening the eyes of our soul—or as St. Augustine of North Africa put it, we need to see with “the eyes of our heart”

Seeing through our reality, to the things of God—for everything on which our eyes rest can tell us of God.

It is not just about looking—but behind the looking there needs to be the perspective of faith.

This is why Bunyan, in his allegorical classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, names one of the jurors, Mr. Blindman, who is condemning the main character Pilgrim as he journeys toward the Celestial City.

Jesus’ invitation to the first disciples was simply “come and see”—and in turn their first invitation to others to follow Jesus is also “to come and see”.

Later, St. Paul writes, “I pray that your inward eyes may be enlightened...”

Ultimately, “to see or not to see” is what the spiritual journey with God is all about—with our heart’s desire and end being to see everything of God there is to see—into all the mysteries of God possible—with the goal of getting nearer to God all the time.

It is critical for us to remember that the journey of faith is a gradual process of illumination into the face of God—and therefore, like this blind man in the story who is begging Jesus to give him sight, our disposition needs to always be that of deeply desiring to see God in clearer and clearer ways.

The spiritual life is ultimately about learning “how to see”—into the deepest dimension.

**II. This miracle story [and the other two stories in the Gospels where we are told of Jesus healing the blind] are also unique as they are the only times when Jesus actually uses something physical/material to heal with.**

He restores their sight, our Gospel tells us, by using “spit” on the man’s eyes. In John’s Gospel, the healing of the blind man story says Jesus used mud, or sand from the ground, which he mixed with spit and then put on the man’s eyes.

Called “spittal” then, it was commonly viewed at the time as having healing and therapeutic qualities.

In other words, Jesus used his hands to create a material substance with which he restored their sight—so it was formed of something of earth and something of heaven.

This is obviously an acted parable, to draw attention to something else.

And it can become a powerful symbol for us too---for God most clearly gives us spiritual sight through the gift of creativity—that which is made with one’s hands---meaning Art---for the nature of creativity itself reflects the image of God, who is first and foremost the ultimate Creator.

Consequently, God’s image is naturally reflected in the creative arts. In this sense God gave us art as a footpath to lead us toward Him.

Art can therefore serve, by its very nature, as a “window on God” for us—where we can encounter in new ways the Sacred—glimpsing into the Divine creative realm.

As Rilke, the German poet said, “How other future worlds will ripen to God I do not know, but for us art is the way.”

The key word I think in all this is revelation—and art, as nothing else, can consistently illuminate the spiritual dimension for us, opening up vistas into the Kingdom of God, revealing for us that which we never knew.

This is the whole purpose of the Eastern Churches using icons—for they aren't praying to icons, but rather “through them” to God.

This is what Van Gogh was trying to portray [who first trained to be a minister, and then after becoming disillusioned with the institutionalized church chose to focus completely on the medium of painting in order to express his understanding of the Sacred] when in his work he says he always strove to “paint the high yellow note”.

It is what Marc Chagall was referring to when he said the artist sees himself/herself as born “somewhere between heaven and earth”, to serve as a “lighted torch” wandering in a vast desert.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian writer and Nobel Prize winner, titled his Nobel Prize speech “The Gift of Art”.

In it he said; “Some things lead us into the realm beyond words. Art thaws even the frozen, darkened soul, opening it to lofty spiritual experience. Through Art we are...sent...revelations not to be achieved by rational thought. ...It is like that small mirror in the fairy-tales...you glimpse the Inaccessible, [a realm forever beyond reach] where no horse or magic carpet can take you. And [your] soul cries out for it.”

This was the experience of Paul Tillich, the renowned 20<sup>th</sup> theologian. As a Chaplain in WWI, he had a peak spiritual experience when encountering Botticelli's *Madonna and Child with Singing Angels*—which brought him great and needed comfort at the time.

Writing about that experience he says, “In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself...That moment [of ecstasy standing before the painting for the first time] has affected my whole life, giving me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth....The experience of great art...leaves one changed in ways that only gradually come to light.”

It was also the experience of the well known Catholic priest Henri Nouwen, the late popular author on the Christian life of faith, when he first saw a print of Rembrandt's *The Return of the*

*Prodigal Son*. For the next three years that painting aroused a spiritual ache in him so deep, that he felt compelled to travel to St. Petersburg, Russia to see the original.

There he sat in front of it for four hours straight—looking, listening, and receiving from it. He remarks, “The painting has become a mysterious window through which I can step into the Kingdom of God”.

He went on to write his best-selling book titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which addressed how that painting transformed his life and vision of God.

And it has been my experience too. I recall being just north of Paris during a particularly difficult time in my life, where I happened to be quite discouraged and disillusioned with the church. I was in the village of Auvers-sur-Oise where Vincent Van Gogh was buried—and as an admirer of Van Gogh’s work, I went to visit his grave. Leaving the cemetery, directly in front of the entrance, I observed a distinctive looking small stone church.

Later that day, while feeling quite depressed, in a bookstore in Paris I saw a print of a painting Van Gogh had done of that same church I had just seen— it happened to be one of his last paintings—that he painted in a state of much weariness – and it ministered to me in a very profound way as I sensed I could understand from how he painted that church what was going through his mind, looking back on the events of his life related to the institutional church---and I could deeply relate to it. It was for me one of the deepest spiritual experiences I have yet had.

And not only can the arts in general be a treasured window on God, but even more specifically for us at St. John’s today we can take all this symbolically further. For in healing the blind Jesus used mud, or sand, mixed with saliva.

And sand actually is the foundation of glass—for glass, such as the glass in these new stained glass windows, is made by sand melted into liquid—which is the first stage of glass making.

I recall that wonderful line of William Blake, the 17th the English poet and artist about “seeing the World in a grain of sand”.

Interestingly for us, the origins of stained glass art are assumed to be in the Middle East, where alabaster ornamental window openings would sometimes have pieces of colored glass mounted onto them.

And ever since the 10<sup>th</sup> century, pictorial stained glass has been used by the church to create an atmosphere that would catch up the viewer into the spiritual world—moving one to contemplation--infusing the soul with God--where the stained glass melts away like a mist, opening out, or opening up, into who God is.

And as light is the very essence of stained glass—we are reminded of God as our Divine Light, “the Light of Life”.

It is about having eyes to see beyond the glass—beyond the two dimensions within the window—catching deeper and deeper glimpses of God.

George Herbert, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican priest and poet, echoes all this in a line of one of his poems:

*A man that looks on glass  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.*

Our new windows speak of the themes of the refuge, deliverance, freedom, and loving care that God provides and displays to us.

And as C.S. Lewis advised, “we must look, and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there.”

## **Conclusion**

Of course, the ultimate “window on God” for us to look through, the deepest work of divine creative art, the “divine icon”, is Jesus Christ himself—where as we are told in the Gospels “the Word become flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth”---for Christ is the most visible reflection on God for us.

And what do we exactly see when we look at Christ and through these various “windows on God”?

High up in Winchester Cathedral in England, sits a beautiful stained-glass window unique to its era—one I will never forget!

It neither tells a Bible story nor memorializes a saint, and its kaleidoscope of colors has a peculiarly modern design.

The window is a relic from a difficult time, when Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan army used iron bars to shatter the Cathedral’s ancient windows—leaving the ground outside littered with glass fragments, which the people of the town picked up and stored until that tragic time passed.

Years later, a cathedral worker volunteered to re-install the window. And high above the nave he assembled those shattered pieces into an abstraction of color.

And today, the reconstructed bits of glass form a work of great beauty, a work of art!

The play of light from the sun and clouds filters through the window to illuminate the cathedral in a constantly changing mosaic!

Reminding us that God is a God of restoration, of redemption, of hope, and of new beginnings—the true nature of God.

And that is what we increasingly see and have revealed to us through the “windows on God” that we are given—leading us to be able to say, as did that blind man healed by Jesus long ago, “I was blind but now I see.”

May that be our experience here at St. John’s and may these new stained glass windows serve to further this in each of our spiritual journeys.

Amen.

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