

V LENT– 22nd March 2020

**SO THE MAN WENT AND WASHED AND CAME HOME SEEING - Biblical
Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM**

John 9,1-41

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.” “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked. He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.” “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.” Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.⁷ Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The man replied, “He is a prophet.” They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?” “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.” He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?” He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?” Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.” The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out. Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said,

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.” Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, ¹⁴ “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?” Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

Chapter 9 of John’s gospel contains a severe accusation against the blindness of a religious institution, for which the good of doctrine is more important than the good of man. The context, Jesus comes out, or rather runs away from the temple, after an attempt at stoning, but, leaving the temple, he meets people who cannot enter the temple, the excluded. Let’s read John chapter 9.

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.” blindness was not considered an illness, but a punishment, a curse sent by God for the sins of men. To clear God of evils, man was accused. Why does evil exist? Because man has committed a sin, and the Lord punishes him. . *“His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* “therefore blindness is a consequence of sin, it was undoubted, the problem was to know if the individual, or his parents, had already sinned. Jesus strictly excludes any relationship between evil, sin and divine punishment. He says: no *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”* Jesus continues the creative action of the Father and, to this individual, after saying that he is the light of the world, *“.. he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes.”* they are the same gestures that the creator made, in the creation of the first man, Jesus continues his creative action. Then he sends him to the pool of Siloe, this important pool in Jerusalem, which means, stresses the evangelist, the "Envoy", why? By going to the envoy, Jesus, who said of himself: I am the light of the world, he regains his sight. So, *“..the man went and washed, and came home seeing.*

But the problems begin for this individual, who is not recognized, is not recognized by neighbors, some say: it is he, it is not him, but how can they not recognize him? It is not that his connotations have changed, before he did not have the light of his eyes, now he has come back to see, he has recovered his sight. Why is it not recognized? Because when you meet Jesus, you acquire a freedom, a dignity such that you are as before, but you are completely different. And he, the ex-blind man, replies it's not me, but "I am!", He claims for himself the divine name, the exclusive name that, in the Bible, is used for God, and, in the Gospels, for Jesus. Why? As it is written in John's prologue, to those who welcomed him, to Jesus, he gave the ability to become the children of God.

Then a series of interrogations begins, and for the first time, seven times will be repeated, they ask him: *“How then were your eyes opened?”* This is the theme of this passage: opening the eyes was a sign of the liberation that the messiah would bring to the oppression of the people. There is a blind man who has recovered his sight, it is a good thing, but the people cannot have an opinion, the people must always be submissive to what the religious authorities think, they are the ones who tell them if it is good or bad. So they take him to the Pharisees, the spiritual leaders of the people, he who had been blind, and here is the problem: it was a Saturday. On Saturday it is necessary to observe what is considered the most important commandment, there is a series of works, 1521 actions that are prohibited and, among these, there is making mud and treating the sick, so here

there was a transgression, a violation of the Sabbath. And the Pharisees again ask him how he recovered his sight, and give a sentence: *“This man (Jesus) is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”* For them whether or not they come from God depends on whether or not the law is observed. For Jesus, whether or not to come from God, however, will depend on the attitude one has towards man, but, for them, the only criterion of judgment is the observance of the law. But there is dissent, others ask him: but how can a sinner do something like this? They ask the blind man again, and here is the irony of the evangelist, the Pharisees aspired to be guides of the blind, and they are blind, instead the one who had been blind now has regained his sight, he says *“He is a prophet.”* they had said, *“This man is not from God”* but being a prophet he therefore comes from God. The highest religious authorities, the Jews, who in this gospel do not indicate (no) with this term the people, but the religious leaders, who do not want to believe that he was blind. To defend their doctrine, they deny the evidence: the religious authorities, faced with the new events of life, having no answers to give, intertwine in the absolutism of their doctrine, deny the evidence, while not finding contradictions in their doctrine, and intimidate him. They intimidate the parents with an interrogation, in which they doubt that he is their son, that he was born blind, and the parents respond in a way, which seems cowardly: we do not know, he is of age, ask him. Why do they respond like this? The evangelist says : *“His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders..”* the religious leaders, *“..who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.”* Being expelled from the synagogue does not mean being expelled from a place of worship, which would not be too bad, but it meant exclusion from civil and social life. On being expelled from the synagogue it was necessary to keep a distance of no less than 2 meters, one could neither buy nor sell anything, and therefore it was civilian death.

“A second time they summoned the man...” who, from miraculously, passes to defendant, and they said to him: *“Give glory to God ...”* this is a formula, an expression that means to recognize, confess the truth, even if it comes to your disadvantage, to your detriment. And the sentence. While the Pharisees were divided between those who said he was a sinner and those who said but as a sinner he cannot do such a thing, they have no doubts: the religious authorities never have doubts, for them it is all clear: *“We know this man is a sinner.”* and here comes all the irony of the ex-blind man, who answers practically saying: listen, I know nothing of theology, I speak of my experience, and in fact he says *“Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know.”* this is your business whether he is a sinner or not, *“One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”* he speaks based on his experience, you say he is a sinner, I don't care, my experience says that for me this is positive. The evangelist here is saying that the primacy of conscience is the most important of any doctrine, even if it was a divine law: man decides the good and the bad on the basis of his own experience, not on the basis of a doctrine, which decrees what is good or what is bad. So he says: I am not in the theological field, I am talking about my experience.

And again, for the fifth time, seven times they will ask him *“How did he open your eyes?”* this is the concern of the religious authorities, because if the people open their eyes, it is over for them, it is the end of everything. And, always with irony, he who had been blind asks: *“Do you want to become his disciples too?”* When religious authorities do not know how to respond, how to reply, they switch to violence, verbal violence first, and, if possible, physical violence, *“Then they hurled insults at him...”* they say, we are the disciples of Moses, they do not follow the living Jesus, but a dead one, Moses, *We know that God spoke to Moses,..”* and then, with a derogatory term - in the

Gospels the leaders, the Pharisees will never use the name Jesus, but will always use this expression “*..this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from.*”

And here comes the common sense of the ex blind man : the common sense of the people is truer and more important than the values of the doctrine, and he makes a very simple reasoning: but it has never been heard that a blind man has recovered his sight, if this man did not come from God, he could have done nothing. Is it so clear, how do religious authorities fail to understand this? Not knowing how to fight back, they replied violently: “*You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!*” they don't want to learn, they are the ones who teach, so “*.. they threw him out.*” The poor ex- blind man should go back to being blind, to prove them right. Having regained your sight is bad, because this sight has been regained through a sinner. But, driven out of religion, he is not damaged, because he finds faith, finds Jesus who welcomes him, he gives himself to Jesus, and the passage ends with a very severe sentence of Jesus to the Pharisees, who aspired to the title of guides of the blind .Jesus says to them. “*If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.*” What is blindness? When one puts the good of the doctrine of the law first, even before the good of men, this is the blindness that prevents one from reading the events of history.