

Blessed Are Those Who Do Not See

By Chris Green

"The devil dazzles; Christ does not."

MIROSLAV VOLF

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

JOHN 20:29

Everything comes down to how we perceive and interpret the world. Everything depends on our seeing-and our not-seeing. Tragically, we have not as a rule developed the knowledge, skills, and character necessary for faithful discernment and sound judgment. We have not been trained to see and not-see as Christ himself does. What is more, we have been stupified by the cares of this life, by the attacks of the enemy, and by pride in our own moral and religious efforts so that we are increasingly desensitized to the reality of the Holy Spirit and hyper-sensitized to the realities of the spirit of the age. As a result, we are ever at risk of leaning on our own understanding while assuming that we are trusting in the Lord.

St. John weaves themes of seeing/not seeing from beginning to end of his Gospel. He bookends the stories of Moses and Thomas, insisting, first, that no one has ever seen God—not even Moses, who according to the Scripture beheld God's glory (1:17-18)—and then concluding that it is truly more blessed not to see and still to believe (20:29).

Arguably, the story of the man born blind in John 9 brings the Johannine understanding of vision/blindness most forcefully to bear. The story emphasizes the characters' frames of interpretation, the hidden convictions that predetermine what they can and cannot see in one another and in Christ. We might take this story, then, as paradigmatic, allowing it to put our own moral vision, our capacity for discerning the truth, to the test.

As he walked 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?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had

said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash! Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

Jesus's miracle, stunning and spectacular as it is, convinces exactly no one of his messiahship. Indeed, it could not convince anyone because it was not seen in the light of faith. On this score, the disciples turn out to be no less blind than the Pharisees are. The former cannot see Jesus in his glory because they assume this man has sinned and has been blinded by God as a punishment for his sins. The latter cannot see Jesus in his glory because they suspect that he healed the man through some devious power. Even the man himself, after being healed, remains unaware of who Jesus is and what exactly has happened to him. He knows no more than the crowds who are dumbstruck by what has happened. Tellingly, he makes no confession of faith. He simply states the facts as he experienced them: "I was blind, and now I see." When he's forced finally to give an opinion, he says only that Jesus must be a prophet.

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You

do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

What do we learn from his story? We learn that Christ opens the eyes of the blind, and that he does so simply because he desires good for us and not in response to our faith or faithfulness. We learn that his ways of healing us are often strange, even bizarre, at least compared to what we've known as normal. We learn that our blindness is not the result of our failures, but the result of a condition into which we are thrown from birth; we are not only sinners but also—and even more deeply, more primally—sinned against. We learn that we can and should be as disarmingly honest as this blind man, owning without pretense what we in fact do not know or cannot comprehend, never claiming to believe more than we in fact do. After all, what makes our witness faithful is not our expertise or our certainty, but the constant acknowledgment of our (at best) imperfect understanding of what the Lord is doing and the constant trust that we are known and loved even as we are ignorant and unfaithful. As St Paul puts it, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him" (1 Cor 8:2). Finally, we learn not only that we must have our eyes opened so that we can see the glory of God, but also that we must be blinded to the vainglorious illusions of the world. The vision Christ gives is both enlightening and blinding.

An old altar song promises that if we turn our eyes upon Jesus the "things of this earth/will grow strangely dim/in the light of his glory and grace." At first blush, the message seems to be all wrong. Surely, we might say—as I in fact have often said—it is in the light of Christ's glory that our eyes are opened to reality, not closed to it. As Scripture declares, in his light we see light. Only in Christ are we enabled to see God and neighbor as they truly are. And yet, there is a truth in the song's message. The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ does blind us—to the unrealities of the world, to the lies we have been told and tell ourselves, to the fantasies that our enemy uses to our destruction. In Christ, we are closed to racist stereotypes and to the obtuse

standards of attractiveness that oppress our sisters and our mothers, our wives and our daughters. In Christ, we find we are turned toward the fullness of God and neighbor, and turned away from the emptiness of worldly power and selfish ambition. Enlightened by his love, we refuse to regard the borders drawn by political powers as finally authoritative in our care for refugees and immigrants. And in times of war, we refuse to allow patriotic sentimentality to sanction hatred for a supposed enemy.

Rowan Williams argues that what makes the saints saintly is their openness to judgment, their "readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked, and left speechless by that which lies at the center of their faith." To be holy, in other words, is to live blinded by the truth. And this is because they share in Jesus's love-blindness. In the language of Isaiah (42:18-20):

Listen, you that are deaf; and you that are blind, look up and see! Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the LORD? He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear.

The Gospels make it clear: Jesus saw people in the fullness of their humanity. He did not see "the poor"; he saw a particular poor man; he did not see "widows and orphans"; he saw this particular widow, that particular orphan. In the same way, we can love one another with Christ's love only if we are also blind to the "issues" that are used to define people. We must not see "the sick" or "the oppressed" or "the marginalized" but specific people suffering in particular ways. We must come alongside them and be to them the providence of God. We must look at them and see what God says is true about them—nothing more, and nothing less. After all, this is how we ourselves are known. And remembering this, we recognize what it means to be blessed because we do not see.