

Sermon

Gutierrez on the liberating of man born blind

Editor: Father Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru, author of the pioneering A Theology of Liberation, has been in Britain, lecturing. On 5 March, Laetare Sunday, he preached at Blackfriars, Oxford. This slightly edited version of his sermon takes the place of Comment this month.

In his letter to the Ephesians St Paul says that we must walk as children of light (5:8). We have here an important biblical image: walking, walking as children of light. Probably you have observed how in the Bible people are all the time walking. Walking or eating ... all the time. These two human actions are the expression of life. And it is life I am preaching about.

The gospel of John is a very long text but a very rich one. And, as miracle stories go, the story in it of the healing of the man born blind (9:1—41) is very long but very rich.

Both in it and in the excerpt from Ephesians which is read with it (5:8—14) Jesus is the Light. That is an idea that comes up again and again in the gospel of John. And light in John is always related to life; light and life are linked. From the very beginning of the gospel, from the first chapter, Jesus is the Light, is Life, and all the miracles of Jesus in the gospel of John are done to give life. Jesus does not do miracles to surprise people, but to give life. And this is, of course, evident above all in the story of the healing of the man born blind.

Jesus speaks, in John's gospel, through signs, through gestures. The healing of this blind man is a sign to indicate something more. It seems to me that we can say that in this gospel Jesus is giving life and that he liberates this man (and us, too) from some ways of understanding that are wrong.

First of all: at the beginning of the story it says he liberates us from fear. In the question put to Jesus, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?', there is the idea of a link between illness and sin, the idea that illness is the punishment for sin. A very strongly-held idea in the Old Testament, and yet, at the same time, the prophets in general were against this idea and so is the book of Job. Job rejects the belief that there is a link between illness and sin. And Jesus's reply is: 'Neither he nor his parents sinned.'

The blind man is not only a sick person but also a beggar, a poor man. Liberation from this link between illness, poverty and sin is very

important for the poor people of the world today, for example. Poverty is not a fate; poverty is not according to the will of God. Poverty is a human fault, and we can take action against poverty in our countries. Poverty is the consequence of social injustice. For many people in my continent there is a link between poverty and sin. For this reason they accept many things, they believe they see the will of God behind their situation. So they are not prepared to struggle against social injustice and to take their destiny in their hands. On this point Jesus is speaking about a God of freedom, a God of love, not punishment, and freedom from fear, it seems to me, is one of the messages of this text.

Secondly: Jesus liberates us, in this story, from a legalistic religion. At the beginning of the argument over this healing one of the objections of the Pharisees is that Jesus is doing these things on the Sabbath, and to heal someone on the Sabbath was not permitted. Again we have a very important point, important for Jesus's time but also for us. We are not free of this legalistic way of understanding the Christian faith. The gospel is always the gospel of the Kingdom, and the Kingdom is the Kingdom of Life, and Jesus liberates us also for life, liberates us also from this view.

In all the gospels, but in Matthew's gospel especially, to be a Pharisee is a danger and possibility for all disciples. To be a Pharisee is not only a historical question of the time of Jesus. To be a Pharisee is to have two minds, to speak in one way and to act in another. This incoherence is what is referred to in the letter of James. James says (1:8;4:8) we must avoid having two hearts (literally, two souls). The legalistic way of understanding things is a danger to us, for the Church as an institution; is a pressing danger, because it is easier to observe formalities than to practise the kernel of the gospel: namely, to love and to be committed to other persons, especially the poor.

Thirdly: Jesus's healing of this man liberates us in another way too, for Jesus liberates not only the blind man but all persons around, including ourselves, from a false and arrogant notion of religious knowledge. In the discussion between the adversaries of Jesus and the blind man they say to him about Jesus 'We don't know what is the origin of this man', while the blind man, the beggar, knows only one thing: that he was blind and now he can see. In other words, he has had an experience, and experience in the gospel of John is very important in the calling of human beings to Jesus Christ; it is the beginning of discipleship.

In chapter one, when Jesus calls his first two disciples, in answer to their question where he lives he says simply 'Come and see'. In this first meeting with Jesus of the two men was the beginning of their being disciples. And John says 'It was four in the afternoon.' A small point. If the two disciples had met Jesus at ten in the morning or two in the afternoon, for you and for me it would have been the same. But not for

them. One of them is John, and this, remember, is the gospel of John. They never forgot the precise time of their encounter with Jesus. And we have, all of us, our 'four in the afternoon' in our lives. I mean, the big moments in which we have met God, have experienced the signs that are the beginning of faith.

The arrogance of the enemies of Jesus is very much in evidence in their talk with the healed blind man, and the text tries to present to us, in some ironic touches, two different ways of thinking. (John and Job are the most ironic books in the Bible.) The healed man, in the face of the many questions of the adversaries, says to them: 'Maybe you want to become disciples yourselves?' He knows Jesus from his healing, from his experience, and, like the Samaritan woman at the well, in chapter four of John, he believes he is a 'prophet'. And at the end of the story, when he asks Jesus 'Who is the son of man?' and Jesus answers 'It is he who speaks to you', he says 'Lord, I believe'.

So we are liberated from an arrogant and false idea of what religious knowledge is. We have, all of us, learned doctrine, but doctrines and affirmations of truth finally make sense if they are nourishing our concrete life as Christians. In chapter three of John's gospel (and John's first letter) it is said that truth must be done, not only affirmed— 'If we say that we share in God's life while we are living in darkness, we are lying, because we are not doing the truth' (1:6). In the story of the healing of the man born blind Jesus says if this man is blind it is not because he is a sinner or because his parents were sinners but 'to work the works of God'. We must express the love of God, for everybody and by preference for the insignificant and oppressed people, with our own commitments and gestures. It means to be present in history, and therefore to risk—as Jesus himself did—misunderstandings and hostility.

So I think we are called in this story in the gospel of John to be free: to be free from fear and to take our lives in our hands; to be free from the evils of a legalistic understanding of faith; and, finally, to be free from an arrogant and false knowledge of God. So that we may 'walk as children of light', as followers of Jesus Christ.

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