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To see as God sees

Roger Karban | Mar. 29, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

We must constantly be aware that each of our four evangelists writes from the perspective of a unique theology. Each looks at and writes about Jesus from an original point of view, often contradicting the theology of those who wrote before or who would write afterward.

It's in this context that I frequently remind my Scripture students of the late Avery Dulles' sharply worded aside during St. Louis University's 1969 Bellarmine Lecture. "Had there been a Holy Office at the time the Gospels were written," the well-known theologian said, "we Catholics would have just one Gospel in our Bibles: Mark, because it was the first. But in our history books we'd often find references to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke and John."

Nowhere is such "heresy" clearer than in today's Gospel pericope.

Fourth Sunday of Lent

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

Almost always, when John's three Gospel predecessors narrate Jesus' miracles, they state the Galilean carpenter demands a prerequisite before he begins the process: faith. In Mark's theology, for instance, faith is so essential that in Chapter 6:5-6, he states, "[Jesus] was not able to perform any mighty deed there [Nazareth], apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith." Normally in the synoptic Gospels, people's faith either empowers or restricts Jesus' miraculous actions, especially when he's dealing with Jewish recipients of his actions.

That's not the case for John. Going against the earlier tradition, the fourth evangelist presumes faith only comes *after* Jesus works the miracle, not before, as in the case of his first Johannine miracle: the changing of water into wine at Cana in Galilee (2:11).

Not only doesn't John's Jesus demand faith, at times he doesn't even expect someone to ask for a miracle. Today's pericope provides a classic example. The "man born blind" has no idea why Jesus unexpectedly rubs mud in his eyes, then tells him, "Go wash!" But only after he receives his sight does his faith journey begin. Step by step, this now-sighted beggar starts the process that will eventually end with his believing in Jesus as God. Notice when at first he speaks to his neighbors about Jesus, he simply refers to him as "the man." Then, under questioning by the Pharisees, he states, "He is a prophet." Finally, after his second encounter with Jesus, "he worshiped him."

John is stating his conviction that Christian faith isn't necessarily something that happens instantly. It can develop over time, the result of experiencing various "signs."

John never calls Jesus' miracles "miracles." He always refers to them as "signs." Signs always point to something else.

Whenever John narrates one of Jesus' signs, we must ask, "What's he trying to convey by this particular miracle?" There's always something behind or beyond it.

John begins and ends by stating his thesis: Jesus is the light of the world. Our faith in Jesus provides us the light to see people and things as the risen Jesus sees them.

The Pauline disciple responsible for the Letter to the Ephesians developed the same insight long before John wrote. "You were once darkness," he writes, "but now you are light in the Lord."

And centuries before Jesus' birth, the author of 1 Samuel was convinced that followers of Yahweh were also expected to see things from a unique perspective. Yahweh throws a monkey wrench into Samuel's plan to anoint the imposing Eliab as the next Jewish king. "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature. ... Not as humans see does God see, because humans see the appearance but Yahweh looks into the heart." In other words, you have to look beyond what your eyes can see to actually perceive what's really there.

People of faith are expected to view people, things and situations in a new light, to become conscious of dimensions that, without the light of faith, we'd never notice. Perhaps that's why both theologians and psychologists often talk about raising one's consciousness.

One implication of today's readings is that those who follow Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus in the Christian Scriptures are on a different level of morality than those who don't profess a biblical faith. Though everyone experiences the same reality, we're expected to see it through newly opened eyes, conscious of those special signs of God's presence and God's will that others frequently overlook.

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