

**LENT SUNDAY FOUR (YEAR A):**  
**JESUS HEALS THE MAN BORN BLIND**



This year, as we continue our journey through Lent, we began last week using the medium of art as a means to explore the various Gospels that we hear on Sunday. Each Sunday, we read from St. John's Gospel, often called "the Gospel of Signs." St. John lays before us a number of encounters between Jesus and others. In each encounter, we see a "sign" of both who Jesus is, but also who we should be. After all, any encounter with the Lord should not leave us unchanged: in fact, it should be a life-changer!

Last week, Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well. This week, our Lord heals a man who has been blind from birth. The artist Duccio di Buoninsegna, who lived in Siena, Italy, painted a huge altarpiece with many panels for the main altar of the Cathedral. This altarpiece is known as the "Maesta." It is the most beautiful and amazing creation, and it took the artist three years to complete, between 1308 and 1311. One of the panels depicts the encounter that we hear about in the Gospel today. As always, what does our artist want to show us and bring out in his painting of the healing of the man born blind by Jesus?

First of all, we can notice that Jesus is in the center of the painting. Our eye is immediately drawn to him, even though there are many buildings and other people in the panel. What is Duccio's message to us here? It is that the Lord should indeed be at the center of our lives, bringing us healing and life. What is more, if Jesus is at the center, then we can see more clearly, especially when there are all sorts of obstacles around us. We can also observe the intimacy and compassion of Jesus. He leans forward; in fact, it looks as though Jesus is almost on tiptoes! He actually touches the man's eyes: a very personal and human gesture. After all, Jesus could have cured the man from a distance, or simply by stretching out his hand. Instead, we learn that our Lord's healing is always personal and intimate.

Secondly, we can see how the man appears twice in the picture: a sort of before and after snapshot of the man. Here Duccio wants us to grasp how encountering Jesus is healing and life-giving. Notice before how the man leans heavily on his stick, for he depends on this to help him get around. After the healing, the stick is cast aside and the man stands erect. Not only that, he is looking upwards, perhaps to heaven. What we cannot see from this one panel is that the next panel in the altarpiece is of the Transfiguration of Jesus (remember the Gospel from two weeks' ago). The man is then looking towards Jesus Transfigured (where Jesus' inner glory as God is revealed). Now the man can see this glory too and so give praise and worship to God. In other words, the blind man's healing by Jesus (and ours), is not just physical, but also deeply spiritual.

Finally, notice too the disciples gathered around Jesus. It is a very human image. Duccio wants us to observe and reflect upon the various reactions to what has just happened. Look at all the different gestures and expressions of the disciples. In this sense, the artist questions us. How do I react when I encounter the Lord, each and every day? How do I see Jesus? Are there things that blind me to seeing God's presence all around me? How do these encounters (in the Eucharist, in the Scriptures, in prayer, in others, in daily events) change me? Do I look towards Jesus to guide me and to enlighten me each day?

Indeed, let us not have the blindness of the Pharisees in the Gospel for this Fourth Sunday (John 9: 1-41). It is a terrible irony in the Gospel that the man born blind is actually the only one who sees! The Pharisees were, sad to say, totally blind to the presence of God among them. Indeed, the presumably poor and uneducated man, who had been blind from birth, gives the Pharisees a lesson in spiritual insight: "if this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything." Let us make sure that we are never blinded by arrogance, pride or prejudice. Rather, may we see people, events and situations as our Lord would see.

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