

Fourth Sunday of Lent, A (Scrutiny) – March 10, 2024 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, AL – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 560 words

A very long gospel indicates a very short homily, so here goes!

There is an interesting detail in this story about the man born blind, whom Jesus healed. This story of course is an allegory of baptism. We can say that baptism completely changes us – and yet we remain the same persons. We could call it a spiritual transplant. Before baptism, our spirits were dead. But then God gives us a share in his spirit, which makes us spiritually alive. We are still the same persons before and after on one level – but with a very different trajectory in life before and after. Before, we were headed toward destruction; after, headed toward life.

Something similar happened with the man in the gospel; this is the interesting detail: after he came back from washing in the pool and being healed, St. John tells us the people said, “‘Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?’ Some said, ‘It is,’ but others said, ‘No he just looks like him.’” They had seen him so many times before, but his encounter with Christ visibly changed him, such that they were no longer sure it was he. Our countenances often reflect our spirits, and what had become visible on his face was a reflection of what Jesus had just done in his soul.

So it was with our baptisms, and so it is – we recognize – with every good confession, too. And is not a visible change even possible? We might have anxiety as we prepare ourselves for the sacrament, even a touch of depression about our sins; perhaps even a fear about the consequences (as we pray in the Act of Contrition) – and this all might well reflect on our faces. But then we open our hearts to the Lord through his priest; the waters of baptism as it were are stirred up and refresh us again; we are absolved. And we emerge renewed – often with a visage of relief.

But I have seen this phenomenon happen with people even before and after they have been to a time of prayer. I have seen individuals go to the Adoration chapel looking care-worn – and emerging with a sense of peace and restored hope. Yes, every meaningful encounter with the Lord has the possibility of restoring us, re-creating us – whether in a big way as through a sacrament, or even in some smaller way, as through a time of sincere prayer. They are all steps along our journey – from death to life, from destruction to salvation, from darkness to light.

Every Lent is such an important part of this overall journey. From the catechumens who will soon experience the radical change of baptism and launch upon a new trajectory in life; to the rest of us who, hopefully, are being renewed by confession; to all of us – again hopefully! – who are encountering the Lord more fully in deeper moments of prayer. Jesus wants to fill us with his life and make us radiant in hope. The transition may well seem so gradual, but we pray that each of us will rouse from the sleep of death one day hearing those words quoted by Saint Paul: “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” – not, then, as yet another step along a journey... but as our crowning unto eternity.