

In this morning's Gospel we hear about a man born blind from birth. Jesus and His disciples were leaving the Temple after the Feast of Tabernacles. He had been threatened with stoning. As they were going along Jesus and his disciples see a blind man. This created a question in the disciples' minds. Remembering what Jesus had said to the man who was crippled whom Jesus had healed they were confused. Jesus had told him to "Sin no more, that nothing worse befalls you." The disciples knew that the crippled man's sins cause his infirmity. But this man was different, he had been blind from birth. Therefore, the disciples asked Jesus; "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

To us this question appears illogical. How could a man have sinned before he was born? It was not possible for a person to sin while still in the womb although to many the death penalty is appropriate for an unborn child. The disciples also knew that God does not punish a man because of the sins of his father. Moses had written in Deuteronomy "and the sons shall not be put to death for the sins of their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin." Which is why the western concept of Original Sin does not make sense.

Jesus responded to them: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." Then Jesus spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam". The man went and washed and came back seeing.

In those days, saliva was commonly believed to possess healing properties. But Christ did not merely use his saliva; he mixed it with the earth to create clay, and clay was also used as a healing medium.

The church fathers saw this as a reflection of the creation of man from the earth in Genesis. St. Irenaeus said, "therefore the Lord made clay, pointing out the original fashioning of man, manifesting the hand of God to those who can understand by what hand was formed from the dust. For what the Creator, that is the Word, had omitted to form in the womb, the blind man's eyes, he then supplied in public." Some of the church fathers say that the man was born without eyes and Jesus created new eyes for him from the clay, others say that he healed the old eyes which had not worked since the man's birth.

Christ used spittle to make him see, because He was about to send the blind man to the pool of Siloam and wanted to make clear that He, not the water of that spring, was the source of the miracle. We must realize that He fashioned and opened the man's eyes by the power which proceeds from His mouth, which is why He spat on the ground to make clay. He then ordered the man to wash off the clay, so that no one would think that the source of this miracle was the earth.

Why did Jesus send the man to wash his eyes in the pool? First, that we may learn of the man's faith and obedience. The man did not reason to himself, "If the clay and the spittle will give me eyes, why must they be washed in the pool of Siloam?" Instead he obeyed Jesus who had commanded him to wash his eyes. Second, with this order the Lord confounds the Jews who willfully rejected Him. It is likely that many saw Him anoint the man's eyes with clay and paid close attention to what he was doing. As a result, no one could later dispute that the Lord had done these things.

Why does St. John tell us that the name Siloam means "sent"? He tells us so that we might learn that the pool of Siloam is a figure of Christ, that it was Christ Who healed the man there. Just as Christ is the spiritual rock, so is He the spiritual Siloam. Jesus often declared: "The Father has sent Me". And St. Paul writes: "for our fathers drank of that spiritual rock that followed them; that rock was Christ."

When the man returned, he was so excited that his family and friends did not recognize him. Many of the people did not believe that this man returning from washing his eyes was the same man as had been the beggar who sat at the side of the road begging. These people were his family and neighbors and should have known.

St. John tells us that the man had been a beggar. Why is this important? If the blind man had been from a wealthy family, he would not have needed to be on the street begging. The family would also have been held in high respect by the Pharisees, which they were not. Jesus did this to show us that the Lord's love for mankind was so inexpressibly great that he chose to help the least of men. This is to teach us that we too must care for the least of our brothers. Having received his eyesight, the man did not hesitate to proclaim that he was the one born blind. And he did not hesitate to tell them that it was Jesus who had healed him.

The people then took the man to the Pharisees. After telling the Pharisees how he had been healed, instead of accepting Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to reject Jesus since he had made clay and healed on the Sabbath. They considered this as sinful. Others said, "How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles?" For no man born blind had ever received his eyesight. A division among the Pharisees concerning who Jesus was began to develop.

Those that had decided to condemn Christ for healing on the Sabbath called the blind man's parents. They wanted to pressure his parents into denying that their son had been born blind. The parents responded to the pressure saying: "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees we do not know, 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 feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be the Messiah, he was to be put out of the synagogue. The Pharisees who opposed Jesus kept insisting that he could not be of God since he was a sinner for healing on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees again tried to force the formerly blind man to agree with them. But he responded: "Whether He is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see." The Pharisees responded "But as for this man, we do not know where He comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where He comes from, and yet He opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does His will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, He could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him He said, "Do you believe in the Son of God?" He answered, "And Who is He, Sir, that I may believe in Him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen Him, and it is He who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshiped Him.

St. John records the healing of the blind man with an eye towards Christian baptism. The blind man is an image of the Christian convert. This is apparent, first of all from the fact that the blind man is required to wash in order to obtain healing. Christians are required to wash in the waters of baptism in order to obtain their

own salvation and healing. We too are washed in the pool of the Sent One, that is Jesus, in order to find our own illumination. All men are born spiritually blind. They are not able to see the glory of God. And salvation is often portrayed in terms of illumination. As we see in Hebrews 6:4 illumination was an early synonym for baptism. St. Justin (who lived around the year 150) said "this baptismal washing is called illumination." The Church continues this practice when we pray in the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy for those who are about to be baptized as "those who are preparing for holy illumination".

In the Gospel today, we heard it stated that Jesus anointed the man's eyes. This corresponds to the anointings that have always been part of the baptismal rite. And then the blind man confessed his faith in Jesus as the Christ with his declaring "I believe, Lord", just as our baptism is an expression of our faith in Jesus.

Even the blind man's post-washing experience of persecution finds its parallel in the persecution of Christians in those days. For after baptism, the Christians would be reviled by their former friends whether they had been pagans or Jews.

Just as the blind man was persecuted and the early Christians were persecuted we too must expect to be persecuted for accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior and being part of his body, the Church. We must trust in Jesus, that in His love he will always be with us, in our daily lives and as we live the life He has called us to live.

We also must ask ourselves: Are we blind to the things of this world that need help? Are we blind to the people who are hungry, to the people who are in sickness? Are we blind to people who are without water? Are we blind people in nursing homes? Are we blind to people in long-term care facilities? Are we blind people who need a friend? Are we blind people who have addiction problems? Are we blind to people in prison?

The Hierarchs of The Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America have approved the sixth Sunday of Pascha, which is today, to be Prison Ministry Awareness Sunday in all Orthodox parishes of North America.

We who do not live in the darkness of a prison or jail cannot truly comprehend the incredible distress men and women prisoners live with each and every day. The Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry needs all our help to bring the love and light of

Christ to these precious souls. The Orthodox Church, through The Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, offers both hope and healing to those living in such distress.

Please remember “these the least of my brethren” and do not be blind to their needs by assisting The Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry with this vital ministry, not forgetting that even a “small gift may earn a crown of glory” (St. John Chrysostom).

Through the prayers of the Holy Fathers...