

The Reading is from the Holy Gospel According to St. John (9:1-38; Acts 16:16-34)

+ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit +

Christ is Risen!

Some of you may or may not know that I am a fan of Reggae music, but I am. And there is one song by Bob Marley that struck me in thinking about today's Gospel and Epistle. In his song "Concrete Jungle," Bob sings that "there are no chains around my feet, but I am not free. I know I am bound here in captivity." He laments, because he knows that true life must be somewhere out there instead of the concrete jungle.

No doubt, Bob was speaking about the oppression and injustices he experienced in his native Jamaica, but perhaps he was also speaking about oppression and injustices around the world, in the midst of development and progress, best manifested in cities poured with concrete. But as we think about the slave girl in today's epistle, we cannot help but reflect on our world today.

There are no chains around our feet, but are we free? Do we not find ourselves bound in a certain captivity? A captivity of societal decadence and decay. We find ourselves slaves of materialism. We become bound by the fetters of competition, chained to the ever shifting trends that we are told are important and necessary. We are imprisoned by what we think ought to make us happy, but it doesn't. Still, we are always "laughing like a clown." But Christ has come and has opened the eyes of the blind man.

When Christ and the disciples came upon the man born blind why did they ask if his blindness was because of his sin or his parents' sin? Well, it was believed that when bad things befell a person a person it was because of their sins or their parents'. To a degree this is true. Our

sins can result in bad things. A hateful heart becomes twisted and torments a man. If we are unfaithful we suffer the pain of divorce. If we steal we suffer the pain of prison, and so on. So there are sins that result in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual anguish and despair.

But there is anguish that seems to have source. We see it in today's Gospel: a man born blind. Sometimes tragedies befall us and the world from out of know where. We cry out in bewilderment, "How could this happen, why, what did we do to deserve this?" When we were on our honeymoon in Scotland, my wife and I met a man, Eddy. Our conversation was light at first, friendly, but then he asked what we did. "Well, Kelly is a teacher, and I am studying to be a pastor." He was greatly offended by this, and indignantly responded, "How can you believe in God?! Why would a good God allow good and innocent people to suffer?"

It's a good question. One we all struggle with at some point. And we ought to struggle with it. How terrible it would be, with all the pain and injustice in the world, to turn a blind eye to it all and never ask, "Why, Lord, does this happen?" We can say only this: Because God has given us free will, and in that freedom we have chosen sin and death, so now we live in an imperfect world where the innocent child gets cancer, where the place of someone's birth could mean the difference between abundance and starvation, life or death, and so on. Nevertheless, God has ordered things in such a way that even the bad things can be for our salvation. Beyond that the answer to why God allows bad things to happen remains somewhat of a mystery that we ought to very careful in delving into.

Eddy would let things go that night, and he kept on us. "If God is all powerful, why doesn't He do something about the suffering and injustice in the world?!" The answer is, He has. He is, and He will. That's what the incarnation was all about, that's what the cross is all about, and why He will come again. Why He carries is a mystery, sure, but we know by Who He

is, we know by what we see in today's Gospel that sin, suffering and death don't have the final word.

In today's Gospel the glory and will of God are revealed. Christ, who is the final and first Word, who created man from the earth has again taken earth and formed the eyes of the blind man. Christ, the new Adam heals our old and fallen Adam. He heals humanity. In the blind man we see our restoration.

The Pharisees did not see this. Although, they were disciples of Moses, who prefigured and spoke of the coming Christ, the light of the world, the Pharisees remained in darkness. And this too happens. There many who perceive the light of Christ as a blinding glare. We know them. They tell us that Christ is not the only light; they tell us that all we have to do is be loving and accepting of all sinfulness, and therefore death. They tell us that everything is cool; everything is ok. Some of them actually call themselves Christians.

In her recent sermon on today's Epistle, Katherine Jefferts Schori, the presiding bishop of Episcopal church in America, is an example. In her words, true illumination is to teach that sin is ok. Using today's epistle she claims that same-sex relationship are only *different* and not wrong. And that God is doing something unexpected in opening society up to the acceptance and approval of such behavior to the chagrin of the establishment and people like St. Paul who are blind to God's activity. It is this blind arrogance, she claims, which is the sin that lands Paul and Silas in jail. But of course we know that Paul and Silas end up in jail because they had true spiritual vision and were able to free the girl from possession and exploration, thus demonstrating the healing and transfiguring power of Christ.

But Schori sees it differently. No, she says Paul is blind. He cannot see that in fact the possessed girl is not really possessed; she just has a *different* "gift of spiritual awareness."ⁱ

Different indeed. Paul's is holy and comes from God. The girl's is unholy and comes from the devil. You see, this is what evil does. It blurs the distinctions between Truth and falsehood; between God and the devil.

Schori continues. The girl has not only spiritual awareness, "she shares in God's nature, just as much as he [Paul] does- maybe more so!"ⁱⁱⁱ Her implication? That same-sex relationships, and those who encourage such behavior, also share in God's nature just as much as, and perhaps more so than people like Paul, because after all the girl's demonic possession is "beautiful and holy,"ⁱⁱⁱ again implying that such behavior is also beautiful and holy.

And so, Schori laments, wondering what would have happened had Paul seen her possession a divine gift in the first place and not as a demonic spirit, again implying what would happen if we all just opened our blind eyes to the divine gift of same-sex behavior. Well, we know what would happen. We would experience God's judgment, given up to our own passions, as Paul says in Romans, I Corinthians, and as the Church has always proclaimed.

Today, for us to say such a thing is considered hateful, unloving, and judgmental. Ours is "a religion of love, a religion of mercy, and a religion of compassion...Not a judgmental theology, but a theology that touches people in their pain."^{iv} So should we treat people poorly? Should we take a Westboro Baptist approach to such an issue? Should we hate? Absolutely not! May it never be so. For we too are sinners, and to hate is murder. We must love.

Love is True, for God is love. So love speaks the truth. If then unrepentant sinful behavior leads to spiritual death, and here we mean the bad kind of spiritual death, why would we encourage others and ourselves to turn from God? Consider it this way: When we deal with those who are addicted to drugs or have alcoholism, we love them. We have mercy and

compassion, but we don't hand them a drink and tell them that it's no big deal. That's not love. That's not truth.

In the end, however, the real problem of Schori's message is not that she preaches the virtue of same-sex behavior, although that is certainly a problem, but that is only a symptom of a much deeper issue. For in approving of sin, she denies the transforming power of Christ. Whenever Christ healed physical infirmities the people understood it as a sign that Christ could also heal the soul. Physical corruption, like blindness, is a result of a fallen world caused by sin, and leading to death. So when Christ demonstrates that he can heal the body, what He is really showing is that He can heal the soul; that He can overcome sin, and thus He can overcome that which is caused by sin- death.

And that is what Schori and other like her are really saying. They are saying that Christ does not have the power to renew humanity, and so they deny the cross, they are saying that death is alive and well, and so they deny the resurrection. They say that sin is ok, and so they deny our freedom and keep us chained in the unanswered bewilderment of "why God do bad things happen?!"

Now we will be called bigots, we will be mocked, lose our tax exempt status, be accused of hatred and so forth. These bullying techniques will be painful, and we will be the innocent who suffer, but thank God, for it's a martyrdom of our age. But like all martyrs we die with love. Love for neighbor, love for our enemies, love for God.

Brothers and sisters, why Paul annoyed with the slave girl? Because the demon is offering impure praise and impure praise is unacceptable to God.^v We praise Him when call Him Lord, but some will say Lord, Lord, and He will reply I never knew you. We must offer pure praise. But how? By communion with God and by capturing the Divine Light.

The blind Pharisees were enraged that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. They failed to realize that “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath...”^{vi} Have you ever noticed that man’s first day, not the day he was created, but his first full day after being created was the seventh day, the Sabbath, when God rested. Our time, our life, is meant to be lived in God’s eternal rest; in God’s eternal communion. God didn’t make man and say, “O.k. you’re alive. Tomorrow, you get to work.” No, He made us and said, ‘tomorrow we will rest together.’ But God’s rest is not like ours. His rest is one of communion, of dynamic stillness, and it is for this that He made us. It is in communion with Him that we offer perfect praise.

Recently, Khouria and I took my parents to an art exhibition at the Mariners’ Museum. Wonderful exhibit, featuring the black and white photos of Ansel Adams and Ernie Brooks. And of course black and white photography places such an emphasis on light. Cameras and light. A camera uses lenses and shutter speeds to capture light, and this a perfect image for us. Our heart ought to be like a camera. But we are not focused on capturing the light of the sun, but the Divine light of the Son of God. We must open our hearts for that Divine light. Love, meekness, humility, repentance, prayer, communion. That is how we capture the Divine light. That is how we offer perfect praise.

In this life we are given a certain amount of time in which to capture that light. Much like a game show, we have a certain amount of time to complete a challenge. The night is coming. Our own death and the age to come when no one will work. All will come into that eternal rest and communion with God, either willingly or unwillingly.^{vii}

I just finished putting together a playhouse and swing set for the kids. Now of course the best time to work on such a project was after dinner when the kids were winding down, Khouria

was home and our daily obligations were over, but I only had until it got dark. Then I couldn't see. I couldn't work.

The night is coming, and when it does repentance will be over, the opportunity for good deeds will be gone, the time to express our faith will be end. The time to work is now. Now is the time to get the camera of our hearts in good working order. Now is the time to capture that Divine light. Now is the time for love, the time for truth, the time for perfect praise. The time for communion.

+ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit +

Christ is Risen!

ⁱ K.J. Schori

ⁱⁱ K.J. Schori

ⁱⁱⁱ K.J. Schori

^{iv} Met. PHILIP Saliba

^v Chrysostom? Orthodox Study Bible?

^{vi} Mk. 2:27

^{vii} Chrysostom