

*As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth.  
His disciples asked him,  
"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents,  
that he was born blind?"  
Jesus answered,  
"Neither he nor his parents sinned;  
it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him*



I have it heard it said that Irish men do not like to go to doctors. Quite honestly, I think that trait is rather common to many men, and it can be a dangerous one to have. In the Redemptorist rule, we are required to get a check-up once a year. I think many of us may be more faithful to our rules about taking a regular vacation than in doctoring. When I was younger, I tried my best to avoid doctors, especially ones that had scales in their offices. I recall a friend of mine who would only go to a doctor who smoked since he was a smoker. But as I have gotten older, I have several doctors that I see regularly and I consider that a blessing. I believe one of my doctors in Brooklyn saved my life by her fine care. The only doctors that really scare me are ophthalmologists. I went to see one the other day for a regular eye check-up after many years. Fortunately, there was no serious problems, but I get very nervous when the doctor starts looking into my eyes with a variety of gadgets. I think most of have fear all sorts of medical problems, but losing one's sight would on the top of the list for many of us.

In our Gospel today, we hear a rather detailed account of Jesus healing a man born blind. It may surprise you that there are only seven miracles in the Gospel of John and each one of them carries a far deeper meaning than simply the physical cure. In many of the miracles of our Lord Jesus, he simply says you are healed or touches the person. There are even miracles where he tells a person to go home and you will find that your loved one is cured. However, in this Gospel, Jesus makes a kind of mud paste from his spittle and the clay on the ground. He rubs it into the eyes of the man and then tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, one of the sacred pools of the Jews. This action brings

sight to the man who has been blind all of his life. The clay reminds us of the creation of Adam and Eve. But Jesus is not creating a new man as he did in the Old Testament. He is restoring him with new life.

Many of the people of that time, both Jews and Gentiles, saw any kind of infirmity as a punishment due to sin. The question is asked by the apostles when they observed the man's blindness from birth is what sin caused his blindness. Since he was blind from birth, it must have been some sin of his parents or ancestors that caused this loss of sight. Such thinking may sound strange to us today, but there are some remnants of it around. Many times, as a priest, I have had people tell me that they were suffering from some serious physical or spiritual problem because God is punishing them for the sins of their youth. We can recall how some preachers of different faith traditions saw AIDS as a punishment due to homosexual sins. There is a very small group of fundamentalist Christians who have harassed family members at the funerals of their sons and daughters who have died in the wars in the Mid-East. They try to upset the funeral by making a scene and protesting that God was punishing America for evil ways by the deaths of these American heroes. Some ministers blamed the night life of New Orleans for the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Such thinking turns God into a monster and is absolutely wrong. Who could believe in such a God? No parent would wish such evil on their children. Why would anyone think God would do so? Jesus condemns such thinking and says that such thinking is the result of far deeper blindness than the physical loss of sight that afflicts this man in the Gospel. Jesus will not put an end to all physical blindness in the world, but his mission is to help all people understand God as a loving father and not an avenging punisher. God is not a God of lightning bolts and thunder.

We know this intellectually, but it is all but impossible not to ask about suffering in the world around us, when we see terrible calamities in the world, such as a tsunami or hurricane that kills thousands, famines that lead to the starvation of the poor, or the sudden death of a father of four with young children, or breast cancer that takes a mother of a family. It is only natural to ask why is God allowing this to happen? When we see the evil of terrorism killing the innocents in front of the British Parliament, when we read of murders and random acts of violence in our cities and towns, and hear of attacks on people because of their religion or race, we, perhaps in the silence of our heart, question God. It is so very human to do so and I certainly fall into those questions from time to time.

But to see God as the author of pain or suffering is to have a very distorted vision of God. I recall a few weeks ago, when I had the 6:30 a.m. daily Mass. I did not realize I had it, so I was lying in my bed, when Sue our sacristan knocked on the door to tell me that the people were waiting for Mass. I dressed quickly, threw some water on my face, put my contact lenses on, and went to say Mass. It quickly became clear to me that I had put my contact lenses on backwards and I could barely read a word from the missal on the altar. I had a very distorted vision.

What is your image of God? The movie *The Shack* based on the best-selling book of the same name seeks to address the question of why is there suffering and pain in world if God truly loves us. This is the most difficult and challenging question for people of faith, and there is no simple answer. But what helps me is to seek to know and understand Jesus. He is the Son of God. He tells us that the one who sees him, sees the father. Jesus is the face of God. He tells us the father and I are one.

Jesus confronts and battles sickness and disease in his ministry. He describes his Father as a loving Father who runs to embrace his prodigal son and greets him with a great celebratory feast. He tells us those life affirming words of John 3:16: *God so loved the world that whoever believes in me will not die but have eternal life.* He calls us to love another treat others as we would have them treat us. Jesus does not take away the suffering of the world, but truly enters into it. He takes a towel and washes feet. He weeps at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He sweats blood on the night before he dies. Our God enters so fully into the mystery of life that he dies on a cross. He feeds us with his body and blood. Jesus is the face of God and I trust in him. God does not send us suffering. Rather, he enters the suffering of world and embraces those in pain in his loving arms.