



St. Patrick's Parish, Church Hill

"A spiritual oasis in the midst of the city"

Under the Pastoral Care of the Marist Fathers since 1868

"To think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things"

22nd March 2020

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year A

Seeing and not seeing

Towards the end of 1989, Woody Allen's movie, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, was released. Some would say it is his finest. The movie is both a comedy and a drama. But more importantly it is a moral exploration. At the heart of the film is an ophthalmologist. His eyes are good. But his heart is not. He is morally blind – so blind in fact that he is capable of murder in order to protect his reputation. He has a patient, a rabbi. The rabbi's eyes are not so good. In fact, he is going blind. Yet he is deeply sensitive to what matters. He sees what the ophthalmologist is unable – unwilling? – to see. The rabbi is a good human being.

Today's Gospel – John 9:1-41 – puts before us a similar drama. The fact that the actual miracle gets only two of the forty one verses seems significant. The physical healing is a sign of something else. That "something else" is what John wants us to reflect on. Most of the text is given over to dialogues which are driven by interrogations and responses – between Jesus and his disciples, Jesus and the man, the neighbours and the man, the Pharisees and the man, the Pharisees and the man's parents, a second dialogue between the Pharisees and the man and a final dialogue between Jesus and the man. The effect – so beautifully there in the final dialogue – is to draw the listener into the reality of Jesus. Jesus hears that they have driven him out. He goes in search of the man. When he finds him, he says, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answers, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him". Jesus says to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he". The man declares his belief, "Lord, I believe".

The man is disowned by his family, threatened by the Pharisees, shunned by his neighbours. Imagine how he feels. However, when he encounters Jesus the second time, he sees now what he had not seen before – not even when he had been cured of his blindness.

We are told at the beginning of this account that "he was born blind". Some scholars interpret this to mean that a certain blindness is part of the human condition – it comes with birth. A central task in life therefore is to discover one's ability to see – to see what really matters. The 14th century English hermit and mystic, Richard Rolle (1300-1349), speaks of "the eye of his heart". Much as the 6th century monk, St Benedict, speaks of "the ear of the heart". The awakening of our spiritual senses is key to our wellbeing. At difference might it make if my spiritual senses are wide awake? How might my life be different if I could see and hear what is more than superficial about myself, other people, events and things?

See www.aquinas-academy.com for background material on the Gospel text.

Fr Michael Whelan, SM
Parish Priest

The parish of St Patrick's acknowledges the Cadigal people of the Eora nation as the traditional custodians of this place we now call Sydney.

SHAME TRANSFORMED: HANNAH

Notes by Tom Ryan sm

Even today, for many women unable to have children, even after fertility treatment, the desire to have a child never goes away. How that is handled, together with any associated emotions, varies from person to person.

In the world of the Bible, this was compounded by the cultural stigma for a 'barren' woman; to be childless was a source of shame, to fail (her husband) as a wife. This was the case with Hannah – whose story begins the first book of Samuel.



It is one of persistence and hope in prayer. What is striking is Hannah's raw honesty and transparency in her dealings with God. She speaks to God from within her distress, 'from the depth of my grief and resentment' (1:16). She pleads for the God of Israel to grant her the gift of a child. After her prayer, she 'was dejected no longer' (1:18). She had named and claimed her deepest hurts, handed them over to God ('let go') and left it all in God's hands.

This scene also intimates Hannah's easy (or 'over') familiarity in her prayer, suggesting a trusting, personal relationship between herself and God. At the same time, there is a sense of a woman wrestling with the divine, as too, with the constraints of her life and culture.

Importantly, we are given an insight into the cultural and social status of women and how these have shaped Hannah's view of herself. That she was not able to have a child was not her fault. Yet, she is made, by family and social expectations, to blame herself. She is also made amenable to the accusation that the Lord God 'had made her barren' (1:6).

What we find in Hannah's story is the interplay of honour and shame. Shame arises from a failure to observe an expected standard. This can be a good thing. The thought of robbing our next-door neighbour through an internet scam would horrify us; I am mortified at the thought. I don't want to be that sort of person. Alternatively, as we know, shame can be destructive, even, toxic. It can invade a person's sense of self to feel constantly tainted and unworthy.

Still, shame can be transformed – as is the case here. By Hannah's prayer and being open to God's action, wherever it led her, she is honoured by God. She conceives a son - Samuel. She dedicates her child to the God of Israel.



Underlying Hannah's prayer is a sentiment repeated in many psalms: 'God is close to the broken-hearted. Those whose spirit is crushed He will save.' God is unfailingly attracted to the person who is vulnerable, needy and open. Hannah's prayer captures emotions found in the Psalms – love, yearning, grief, lament, remorse, loneliness, hope.

Even with feelings we don't like, Hannah reminds us – just be ourselves before God. We don't have to be in our Sunday best to pray.

All God wants is that I turn up: 'come as you are, pray as you can.'

A Lenten reminder?

