



Rev. Dr. Theodore Stylianopoulos

A Year of the Lord Liturgical Bible Studies

Volume 4: Easter to Pentecost

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Department of Religious Education

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Chapter 6 Sunday of the Blind Man

Prayer

Sing: *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen)

Christ our God, Sun of Righteousness, by Your divine touch You gave light to the eyes of the blind man who had been deprived of light since birth. Enlighten also the eyes of our souls, and make us sons and daughters of light so that we may cry out to You in faith: great and beyond words is Your compassion towards us! Loving Lord, glory to You!

— Vesper Hymn, Sunday of the Blind Man

Sing: *Christos Anesti* (Christ is Risen)

Christ the Light

Throughout this Easter season, up to the Feast of the Ascension, the priest holds a lighted taper, symbol of the light of the resurrection, at various times during the Liturgy. The hymns of this season resound with the words light, glory, brightness, radiance, and splendor.

The paschal theme of light is also the main theme of the Sunday of the Blind Man. We behold Christ as the light of the world, “the real light – the light that comes into the world and shines on all humanity” (John 1:9). The healing of the blind man, brilliantly dramatized by the inspired pen of the Evangelist, is a victory of the light over darkness. Christ the Light gives physical light to the eyes of the blind man. Christ also gives spiritual light to the soul of the healed man who thus becomes a true son of light. These and other similar images shine through the Gospel reading as well as the hymns of the Sunday of the Blind Man.

What might have been some of the feelings the blind man had before he was healed?

The man born blind reflected within himself saying: Was I born blind because of the sins of my parents or was I born blind to bear testimony to the unbelief of nations? I can no longer endure asking when it is night and when it is day. My feet can no longer bear the cuts of stones. I have not seen the sun shining, nor an icon of my Creator. But I entreat You, Christ my God, shine upon me and grant me mercy.

– Vesper Hymn, Sunday of the Blind Man

What are some of our own feelings?

The eyes of my soul are blind! I come to You, O Christ, in repentance. I cry out to You as the man born blind: You are the light above all brightness shining upon those in darkness!

– Kontakion Hymn, Sunday of the Blind Man

Read John 9:1–12, which is the first part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Blind Man.

What did the disciples ask Jesus about the blind man (verse 2)?

What did Jesus answer (verse 3)?

What does Jesus testify about Himself (verse 5)?

By what actions did Jesus heal the blind man (verses 6–7)?

1. Read again the first of the above hymns. Discuss the need to be sensitive to the feelings and special problems of blind and other handicapped persons.

2 Jesus said, “He is blind so that God’s power might be seen at work in him” (John 9:3b). What explanations of this difficult statement can you give?

Patristic Interpretations

Although the actions of parents certainly do influence both the physical and spiritual well-being of their children, the Church Fathers rejected an idea common among ancient peoples that children are morally responsible and even sometimes punished by God for the sins of their progenitors. Following the teaching of Jesus, St. John Chrysostom denies the universal validity of Deuteronomy 5:9 (“I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.” RSV). Rather Chrysostom points out that this principle was cancelled by God Himself through the words of Ezekiel: “As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’” (Ezekiel 18:3, RSV). Chrysostom also states: “Sin alone is an evil, but blindness is not an evil” (Homily 56 on the Gospel of St. John).

The Church Fathers also saw rich symbolism in the healing of the blind man. Irenaeus interpreted Jesus’ act of making clay as a symbol of the creation of humanity now being

recreated by the same eternal Word of God. The Pool of Siloam (Siloam means *apestalmenos* which is literally “the one sent”) is, according to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, a symbol of Christ “whom God sent” to the world (John 17:3). Chrysostom calls Christ the spiritual Siloam and says that Christ, not the waters of Siloam, healed the blind man. For St. Augustine the blind man symbolizes all of fallen humanity which needs enlightenment. For St. Cyril of Jerusalem the blind man symbolizes the blindness of the gentile nations, an idea echoed in the first of the above hymns. In the early Church the account of the blind man was a baptismal lesson read to the catechumens on Easter just before their baptism, and it signified their cleansing from sin and their enlightenment by the light of Christ. Baptism is still today sometimes called *photisma*, or illumination.

Light and Darkness

Other significant passages in the Gospel of St. John proclaim that Christ is the light of the world. In John 8:12 we read, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness.” Another passage is John 3:19–21:

The light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Anyone who does evil things hates the light and will not come to the light, because he does not want his evil deeds to be shown up. But whoever does what is true comes to the light in order that the light may show that what he did was in obedience to God.

The truths of the above passages are masterfully illustrated by the story of the man born blind. St. John the Evangelist portrays the contrast between light and darkness, belief and unbelief, discerning the mystery of Christ and remaining willfully blind to it. Three times the blind man declares his ignorance (John 9:12, 25, 36) as he is led progressively to the fullness of light. Three times the Pharisees make self-confident statements about Jesus (John 9:16, 24, 29) while they are plunging deeper into darkness. (See R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. I, Doubleday, 1966, p. 377.) The blind man, because of his sincerity, is able to see. The Pharisees, who claim to see, because of their unwillingness to believe remain blind! The blind beggar confounds the wise teachers! In their evil disposition and lack of compassion they abuse him and cast him out (John 9:34; compare John 6:37b, “And him who comes to me I will not cast out” RSV).

Read John 9:13–34, the second part of the Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Blind Man.

What did the Pharisees say about Jesus (verses 16 and 24c)? _____

What did the former blind man say about Jesus (verse 17b)?

Tell in your own words why his parents refused to acknowledge the miracle (verse 22):

What was the former blind man's irrefutable proof (verse 25b)? "One thing I do know ...

Tell in your own words why he concluded that Jesus came from God (verses 31–33):

Read also John 9:35–41 (pages 138-139), the conclusion of the entire story. The actual Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Blind Man ends with verse 38.

What was the former blind man's double respond to Jesus's messianic claims (verse 38)?

Why were the Pharisees guilty according to Jesus (verse 41b)?

1. What are the qualities of light? In what ways does physical light symbolize spiritual light?

2. Jesus said to the Pharisees: “If you were blind, then you would not be guilty; but since you claim that you can see, this means that you are still guilty” (John 9:41). Think about this statement of Jesus and discuss what it means to you.

3. How can we best approach those who resist light so that we may help bring them to the light? As part of your answer, meditate on Matthew 5:14–16 and 1 John 2:9–11.

Meditation

There are three kinds of sight. The first is physical sight, a remarkable gift that enables us to see light, faces, colors, and things, and to move easily within our physical environment. We value this gift, and in order to protect or enhance it we provide correct lighting, optometrist, eyeglasses, eye clinics, eye surgeons.

The second is mental or intellectual sight. “I see!” we exclaim when we solve a problem or acquire new knowledge. By means of mental sight the tremendous world of science, medicine, electronics, and computers is being created. Also a precious gift of God (and how much we value IQs – perhaps too much!), we seek to develop this intellectual sight by means of teachers, libraries, schools, universities, museums, laboratories.

And the third is spiritual sight, the intuitive vision of the inner person by which we come to have personal knowledge of God. Christ called his spiritual insight by different names – faith, having eyes to see, having ears to hear, the light of the soul’s eye, a pure heart, seeing in the truest sense. This is the most important of the three kinds of sight because it has to do with what is

ultimate in life. Spiritual sight is the best guide in the use and enjoyment of the other kinds of sight. Our teachers here are Christ, the prophets, apostles, saints, and other men and women who have developed their spiritual sight. The power of spiritual sight is the power of the Holy Spirit. The fruits of spiritual sight are personal communion with God, true relationships with other human beings, and right use of things in the world.

The Feast of the Ascension

“On the Thursday of the sixth week of Pascha, we celebrate the ascension of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ,” according to the *Synaxarion* (Festal Commemoration). This feast is based on the New Testament texts of Luke 24:50–53 and Acts 1:1–12, which tell about the event of Jesus’s ascension forty days after Easter. The day before this feast is the Afterfeast of Easter, the last day on which the Easter hymn “Christos Anesti” (Christ is Risen) is changed.

The ascension marks the end to the early sequence of Christ’s resurrection appearances. (Christ appeared to St. Paul in a special calling much later.) The ascension also indicates the glorification (*theosis*) of human nature in the risen Christ and anticipates the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost.

The joy of the Feast of the Ascension is expressed by the main hymn of the feast:

Christ our God, You ascended in glory and You gladdened Your disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. Your blessing assured them that You are the Son of God and the Redeemer of the world!

– Dismissal Hymn, Feast of the Ascension

The theology of the Feast of the Ascension is expressed by the following hymn:

Sweet Jesus, You came to earth and lived among people without being separated from the bosom of the Father. Today You have ascended in glory from the Mount of Olives and are enthroned together with the Father, raising up compassionately our fallen nature. Therefore the heavenly bodiless powers were amazed at the wonder of the miracle and in awe they magnified Your loving kindness. Together with them we who are on earth glorify Your coming among us and Your ascension. Entreating You, we cry out: by Your ascension You filled the disciples and the Theotokos who gave birth to You with infinite joy. Through their prayers make us, Your elect, also worthy of this joy, because of Your great mercy!

– Vesper Hymn, Feast of the Ascension

Read Acts 1:1–12, the Epistle reading for the Feast of the Ascension.

Whom does St. Luke address in the Book of Acts (verse 1)?

_____."

What did Jesus do for forty days prior to His ascension?

He gave _____ by the power of the Holy Spirit to the apostles (verse 2).

He _____ to them and gave proof that He was _____ (verse 3a).

He talked to them about _____ (verse 3b).

He ordered them to wait in Jerusalem for the _____ of the Spirit (verse 4).

Why did the apostles need the Holy Spirit (verse 8)?

To be filled with _____.

To be Christ's _____ throughout the world.

What did the two angels promise about Jesus (verse 11b)?

How can you rejoice in and affirm the lordship of Christ...

In your personal life this week?

In your family life this week?

In your parish life this month?

Prayer

Together with the angels, let us on earth celebrate the Savior's ascension in glory. Christ our God, You became man according to Your own will. You appeared among us according to Your good pleasure. You suffered in the flesh and rose from the dead, trampling upon death. You ascended in glory, filling all creation with Your presence. And You sent us the Holy Spirit that we may praise and glorify Your divinity. Lord, glory to You!

– Adapted Hymns of Praises, Feast of the Ascension