

## Blindness & Sight

July 27, 2014

It is said that St. Paraskevi, whose memory we celebrated yesterday, healed the eyes of her would-be executioners when they were burned by the boiling oil into which they threw the saint. St. Panteleimon, whose memory we celebrate today, healed a blind man, who was later executed because he espoused the Christian faith. Our Lord healed blind people on several occasions, one of which we read about today.

“At that time, as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David.’ When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes, saying, ‘According to your faith be it done to you.’ And their eyes were opened.”

Blindness and sight are common themes in Scripture, prayers and hymns. In many places, however, blindness refers not to physical blindness but rather to spiritual blindness.

One of the great prayers of Orthodox Christian tradition is known as the prayer of St. Ephraim, which says, “Grant that I may see my own failings and not judge my brother.” It is quite profound, because it reminds us that our number one concern should be not the faults and mistakes of other people, but rather our own faults and mistakes.

It is easy to criticize others: politicians, priests, Wall Street bankers, homosexuals, the Hollywood crowd, leftists, the Tea Party, etc. Sometimes the criticisms are merited. Ultimately, our Tradition holds that renewal always begins with inner renewal, and inner renewal always involves awareness of our own weakness and mistakes. St. Anthony once said that “a person’s chief task is to be mindful of his sins in God’s sight, and to expect temptation until his last breath.” So the prayer, “Grant that I may see my own failings and not judge my brother,” is a call to open our eyes to one form of spiritual blindness, a failure to see ourselves as we truly are.

A second form of spiritual blindness is a failure to see God. Psalm 14 begins with the words, The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” We read in today’s gospel that after Jesus healed a man, his critics responded, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons,” implying that the devil rather than God had performed a miracle.

This type of blindness appears in the story of the farmer who had a record crop (Luke 12). “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’” He failed to see that God gave him whatever he had.

The blindness here is the failure to see the good things in life as gifts from God. It is very common. When things go badly, we ask, "Where is God?" When things go well, we say, "I did it with hard work and determination." We pray in the course of the Divine Liturgy, thanking God "for all things that we know and do not know, for blessings seen and unseen that have been bestowed upon us." God's blessings are everywhere, but we are often blind to them.

This is why the topic of stewardship is a moral and religious topic. Everything that we have comes from God; sharing it with the physically and spiritually needy is an expression of gratitude for our blessings. To say that it is mine and mine alone is immoral.

There is a third form of spiritual blindness, the failure to see suffering in our fellow humans. Look no further than the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, told in Luke 16: "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." Such blindness is implicit in the story of the Last Judgment, when the condemned ask the Judge, " 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'" and the Judge replies "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Speaking personally, I became involved with St. Herman's House, a men's shelter, because I saw it as a way to help myself and our parish: we Middle Class Americans who live in the suburbs in comfortable homes need to see that people do suffer even here in this great country of ours. I have derived great personal benefit from seeing women in India who gather cow manure in their hands and form it into patties as if it were hamburger meat, so that they could dry the manure in the sun and use it for fuel. The Rich Man in the gospel could be me: it is easy for me to live my reasonably comfortable life in the eastern suburbs and not see that a huge percentage of the world's population lives a meager existence.

My point is that physical blindness is only one form form of blindness, and that spiritual blindness takes many forms: failure to see ourselves as we truly are, failure to see God in all the blessing He offers us, and failure to see human suffering, present all around us. We need to attend to these forms of blindness as much or more than we do physical blindness.

We honor St. Panteleimon and St. Paraskevi as healers, and especially healers of eyesight, and at the same time we must consider blindness as not simply a physical illness but even more so as a spiritual one. Through their prayers may we see clearly and may we attain the blessing promised by the Lord, "Blessed are the clean in heart, for they shall see God." Amen.

Fr. Stephen J. Callos

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Text: Matthew 9:27-35

At that time, as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith be it done to you." And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly charged them, "See that no one knows it." But they went away and spread his fame through all that district.

As they were going away, behold, a dumb demoniac was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the dumb man spoke; and the crowds marveled, saying, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." But the Pharisees said, "He casts out demons by the prince of demons."

And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.