



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



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### LAETARE SUNDAY, YEAR A

According to St. John's gospel, the healing of the man born blind took place on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast lasted eight days; it commemorated the Israelites' journey through the wilderness with Moses on the way to the Promised Land, when God himself led them, manifesting his presence in the form of a pillar of fire. Despite all the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors, the Jews remembered that during that terrible passage, they had known an indescribable closeness to God, who fed them with bread from heaven and with water from the rock. Devout Jews believed that when the Messiah would come, this miraculous presence of God would be renewed among them, with the bread from heaven and the living water. The symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles looked both to the past and the future: the great deeds of God were ritually evoked, and the rituals themselves pointed to the day when God would definitively redeem Israel and manifest his glory to all mankind.

Let us consider for a moment the rites that took place at the Feast of Tabernacles, so that we can understand the backdrop for the healing of the blind man.

On the first evening of the eight-day festival, four golden lampstands were set up in the Court of the Women in the Temple. These stands were enormous, 150 feet high, it is said; they symbolized the Pillar of Fire that had led the Israelites through the desert. On the last night of the festival, the main lampstand was left unlit as a sign that Israel was not yet redeemed and still awaited the day of salvation, when God would manifest himself and illuminate the world's darkness, as by a new pillar of fire. It was in this liturgical setting that Jesus said, "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (Jn 9.4-5). In saying these words, Christ was presenting himself as the inner meaning of the feast and as the fulfillment of Israel's hope. The Paschal candle recalls this at the Easter Vigil, when the great candle is carried in procession and is plunged into the baptismal water.

The baptismal symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles becomes even more evident as we look more closely at the Jewish liturgy of that time. On each morning of the octave, the ritual would begin with a procession to the pool of Siloam, the reservoir that supplied the Holy City with spring water. The priest at the head of the procession would fill a golden pitcher with water and carry it back to the Temple, to be poured out as a drink-offering at the altar. As the priest drew the water from the pool, the choir would sing the text from Isaiah, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Is 12.3). This text should remind us of Jesus words on this same occasion: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall



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flow rivers of living water” (Jn 7. 37). St. John himself tells us that the word *Siloam* means “Sent”: man, who comes from the dust of the earth, is saved by washing in the waters of Siloam—in the waters of *him who has been sent*. In St. John’s gospel, Jesus is so often described as *he whom the Father has sent* that this almost becomes a title of Jesus, and a description also of his apostles who preach and baptize in Christ’s name (cf Jn 3.17, 34; 5.36).

The healing of the man born blind is the sign of the Kingdom, of the illumination and salvation that comes by faith in the Savior. Christ is the Pillar of Fire that leads us through the darkness of this life and who enlightens our blindness, and he is also the fountain of living waters who quenches our spiritual thirst.

Never forget that Jesus’ action precedes the blind man’s faith, and that the Lord uses material means to effect the healing. Jesus sees the man’s need and after answering the disciples’ question about who was to blame for the blindness, he heals the blind man, using clay made out of earth and saliva. Now we may consider this use of saliva and common earth as somewhat distasteful: couldn’t Jesus have used something more hygienic, perhaps? And yet, the very physicality of Jesus’ actions drive home to us the truth of his Incarnation, of his embodiedness, and of our own embodiedness: even Jesus’ spittle, like the hem of his garment, is filled with his grace and blessing. The very same God who created the world and pronounced it good has willed to use matter--earth and saliva, bread and wine, flesh and blood and water--in order to restore the world that sin has marred. The entire sacramental and liturgical life is already implicit in our faith in the Incarnation, in God becoming man and thereby restoring our humanity in God’s likeness.

Already in the second century after Christ, St. Irenaeus of Lyons saw in today’s gospel the pattern of redemption of human flesh by the life-giving flesh of Christ. St. Irenaeus wrote these words:

The Lord bestowed sight on the one who was blind from birth—not by a word, but by an outward action. He did this neither casually nor simply because this was how it happened. He did it this way in order to show it was the same hand of God here that had also formed man at the beginning. And therefore when his disciples asked him why he had been born blind, whether by his own fault or his parents’, Jesus said, “Neither this man sinned, nor his parents, but that the works of God might be manifested in him.” The work of God is, after all, the forming of man. He did this by an outward action, as Scripture says, “And the Lord took clay from the earth and formed man” (Gn 2.7). Notice here, too, how the Lord spat on the earth and made clay and smeared it on his eyes, showing how the ancient creation was made. He was making clear to those who can understand, that this was the same hand of God through which man was formed from clay. For what the creating Word had neglected to form in the womb, this he supplied openly. He did this so that the works of God might be evident in him, and so that we would now seek for no other hand than that through which humanity was formed. Nor should



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we seek another Father, knowing that the hand of God which formed us in the beginning, and forms in the womb, has in the last times sought us lost one out. He is gaining his own lost sheep and putting it on his shoulders and joyfully restoring it to the fold of life (*Adversus Haereses* 5.15.2).

Already today, on Laetare Sunday, we have a foretaste of the joy of Easter, even in the midst of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we were told, “Remember, man, that you are dust and to dust you will return”; and today we see that that very dust of the earth becomes life-giving at the Savior’s touch. St. Paul tells us that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Co 5.17). Let us then be like the blind man healed by Jesus and say to him, “Lord, I believe” and fall down and worship him (Jn 9.38), even at the cost of separating ourselves from anything that stands in the way of following the Savior who has changed our darkness into light and our sorrow into joy.