

## Blindness and the New Church

by the Rev. James P. Cooper

*Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him (Mark 8:22).*

Our text is taken from the Gospel of Mark where one of the Lord's many miracles of healing is described. In this case, a blind man was healed. The blind man in this story is a symbol for those of us who are hurting, who are in real pain because of the mistakes we have made due to our spiritual blindness.

In the Word, blindness generally represents the inability to see the truths of the Word. It's also important to recognize that there are different kinds of blindness. There are those who are blind to spiritual truth because of their circumstances, that is, those who are ignorant of the truth through no fault of their own. Then there are those who are blind because their loves of self and the world twist and pervert the truth until it is unrecognizable. They make themselves blind because they close their eyes to the truth.

As the common saying goes, "there is none so blind as he who will not see." In either case, spiritual blindness leaves us without the means to judge the course of our lives. We cannot see if we are preparing ourselves adequately for heaven. We cannot see if the anger we feel is zeal to protect what is good or hatred toward those who threaten our possessions and position in society.

The purpose of the Lord's Second Coming, as we know from the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, was to shine the light of truth on people, to give them the means to see truth for themselves, to decide freely, for themselves, what kind of spiritual life they should lead. The so-called "Last Judgment" was a judgment by truth—truth which took away spiritual blindness and set people free. That light was provided to those in the spiritual world by means of the revelations given to Emanuel Swedenborg, and it was the completion of the last of those works, the *True Christian Religion*, and the consequent establishment of the New Christian Church on June 19, 1770 that we celebrated last month.

So we can see that spiritual truth from the Lord, given through the Word, is the only means of curing spiritual blindness. We can see this further illustrated by what happened next in the story from Mark. "So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything" (8:23).

Remember also that our text tells us that "they begged Him to touch him." It is important to note that although the Lord has the power to heal any spiritual disease, He will only do so if He is first approached, for nothing in a person's life can be changed apart from his own freedom. If the Lord were to approach us on His own initiative, there would be no freedom. So, instead, He presents Himself, informs us of His willingness to help, and then awaits our decision, and His patience is Infinite.

To be led by the hand out of the town means that in choosing to approach the Lord for help, by recognizing our need for His help, we have already begun the steps to our recovery. For then we

have left Bethsaida, left the state of disorder or ignorance that caused our blindness, and have taken the first positive steps toward choosing the truth and the light. So we begin to leave the states that have caused our spiritual crises.

The story tells us that the Lord then spit in the blind man's eyes. This is a powerful combination of images that leads us to see what the person going through these states might feel. On the one hand, water from the mouth of the Lord corresponds to truth, and our rational mind tells us that it should be a good thing to have truth directly from the mouth of the Lord applied to the eye—the organ that represents understanding. Yet there is something repellent in the thought of anyone spitting in our eyes. It seems humiliating, like a terrible insult.

On the spiritual level, what could be more humiliating than suddenly awakening to the fact that the innocent little fantasies that we have cherished for so long and enjoyed so much actually constitute adultery because they are destructive of marriage? What could be more humbling than really understanding that the little “unofficial benefits” we have enjoyed at work are actually stealing. We could go on at some length in this vein, but the point should be clear that when we first recognize that we are in a state of disorder, we don't always see just how bad it really is. We tend to minimize the damage. But truth from the Lord is bright and powerful. It shows our errors as glaring, and to see ourselves as He sees us *is* humiliating.

The text continues, giving us the blind man's response. He looked up and said, “I see men like trees, walking” (Mark 8:24). It is a fact that people who have had their sight surgically restored, and who see for the first time (or for the first time in many years), have a great deal of difficulty sorting out the images they see. In their blindness, they have built up pictures of how things ought to look from the information they have received from their other senses. Things like perspective and shading completely baffle them for a time, so that they must continue to use their seeing-eye dogs for awhile after their sight is restored. This is the phenomena that the blind man is referring to when he says that men look like trees to him.

Again, the point of this story is not to tell us about how blind people gradually recover their sight, but to tell us about how—even when we have been touched by the Lord and had the eyes of our understanding opened—we don't immediately come into a pure understanding like that of the angels. The new truth has to be understood, assimilated, adapted to our own experience and character, and studied in the light of the other truths that we already know. It takes time to change a whole lifetime, in fact.

But we can have the courage and strength to carry on because we know that the Lord does not just touch us and then abandon us. Instead, He stays near, guiding our recovery, gradually showing us the way things ought to be. We read from Mark “Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly” (Mark 8:25). Eventually, in time, we find spiritual peace; we come into new states of life where truths we never imagined are easily seen.

While we are in a state of blindness, of personal evils and selfishness, it hurts when we read the Word, because its light shows up our weaknesses. But it is not the purpose of the Word to *cause* pain, but instead to *remove* its cause. We examine ourselves in preparation for the Holy Supper,

not so that we can see how bad we are, but so that we can direct the Lord's healing power to where it is needed most.

In the Old Testament, the Lord established a basic covenant with the Children of Israel: He would protect them and be their God if, in return, they would simply obey certain external rules. When He came to earth in person, as described in the New Testament, that covenant was changed from an external obedience to an internal, moral response. While on earth, the Lord introduced the Holy Supper as the sign of an internal acknowledgment of our need to change our attitudes, not just our actions. And the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church—the instrument of His second coming—serves to reestablish that covenant, so that it is rational and spiritual in origin and shows itself as moral and civil behavior.

We are free to respond to the Lord on any level we choose. If we wish, or are able, to do no more than faithfully obey His commandments *because* they are from Him, then we will find a wonderful, eternal home in the natural heaven. If, on the other hand, we delight in searching out the reasons behind His commandments and seek to obey them in spirit as well as in the letter, then we will find our home in the spiritual heaven. But if our greatest delight is in serving the Lord and doing what is good, then our spiritual home will be with the celestial angels. The point is that this choice depends on our *response* to the Lord's invitation to enter into His covenant. For the Ancient Church, the sign of this covenant was the rainbow. In the Jewish Church, it was the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, which stood over the Ark of the Covenant as a constant reminder of the Lord's presence. For the Christian and New Christian churches, the sign of His covenant is in the two sacraments that are universal entrances to the church: baptism and the Holy Supper.

Take time, then, to reflect on these things. Pray that the Lord will touch you with His divine truth and cure your spiritual blindness. Do your part to enter into His covenant with a humble heart, and He will enlighten your mind and lead you into states of eternal peace.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 146; Mark 8:22-26; *Apocalypse Explained* 391