

Sermon for 3 April 2011  
Laetare Sunday, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

One of the problems faced by theologically inclined people is that there is always a danger of over-theologizing leading to inaction. This is not to say that theological reflection is not in itself a worthy endeavor, but rather that sometimes other methods are, perhaps counter-intuitively, more direct routes to truth.

Take that age-old problem that we call theodicy- the problem of evil. Why do bad things happen to good people? We can spend a lifetime sitting and thinking about how to explain evil and never come to any satisfying conclusion. Indeed, some have done so, and some have even lost their faith in the process.

Or we could set out to bring some comfort to the afflicted, to help the orphan and the widow and

the beggar in what small ways we can and eventually come to some satisfying conclusion, not in the form of a theological axiom which one can publish and give lectures about, but in the form of the satisfaction one receives in knowing that he has done God's work, in knowing that while evil exists and cannot be explained, one has nonetheless done something to weaken its hold over the most vulnerable.

We see these two approaches—action and reflection—in this morning's Gospel, and at least in the instance of the man born blind, the former was apparently the proper approach. Here is a man who is in tremendous need, a blind person in those days almost invariably being condemned to a life of panhandling, no other profession being open to one so disabled. And how do the disciples respond? They see the encounter as an opportunity for theological reflection. "Rabbi," they ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" There

is, of course, in their question a false assumption, namely that misfortune is directly linked to some specific trespass. I have mentioned before from this pulpit something called a deuteronomic view of history, which is the commonly held belief that such a simple connection exists between sin and hardship (or, for that matter, between righteousness and fortuity). We need not revisit this view in great depth again today, except to say that Jesus seems to reject it, but not in the manner we might expect.

Jesus does not take the time to respond to the disciples by presenting an alternative philosophical system; he does not (at least on this occasion) unveil a new definition of weal and woe, offering details of their nature and various causes. Rather, he quickly dismisses the suggestion that somebody's sin caused the man's blindness, and then says that there's work to be done. He moves quickly from reflection to action. "We must work the works

of him who sent me, while it is day;" he says,  
"night comes, when no one can work."

Now, lest I be accused (for the first time in my life) of anti-intellectualism let me say what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that good old theological reflection of the sort where one sits down surrounded by dusty books producing weighty texts about theodicy and other theological problems is bad or unnecessary. We'd be as blind as the Pharisees if men and women had not done that work, and the Church would be sorely lacking if everyone adopted an unreflective sort of faith. You see, it's teaching—doctrine—which produces and permits conviction, and without convictions our efforts are meaningless. In this sense, theological reflection has to precede action if said action is to rise to the status of Christian charity.

What I am saying, though, is that Christian discipleship is as much a matter of the heart as it is a matter of the head, and when the latter crowds

out the former our theology can be unmasked as no sort of theology we'd want to publish. Imagine if the disciples had received the kind of answer they presumably wanted from Jesus: a sustained reflection on the problem of evil complete with definitions of terms, Old Testament references, and a few clever bons mots to keep their attention. It would probably be good reading if you're into that, but the man would have remained blind, and Christ would have been revealed as being more interested in theological problem solving than in caring for the needy.

What is even more notable here is that a faith sustained by works of charity can enlarge one's theological perspective. The problem the Pharisees had in this morning's reading was a dogmatism resulting from what we might consider a lack of love. If the Pharisees had loved their formerly blind brother they would have rejoiced in his being cured, and they might have been able to enlarge

their view of God to encompass the work of Christ. As it happened, they cast the formerly blind man out because their small faith could not allow for that which was to them theologically problematic.

We do well, I think, to heed the warning implicit in this story. We are just as capable of falling into dogmatism as the Pharisees and we're just as likely as the disciples to see a suffering brother or sister as a theological conversation starter rather than seeing him as one to whom we might show mercy and loving-kindness. When we choose to reach out, our own understanding of God's love is increased. We start seeing that needy person not just as a target for our charity, but as one already gifted, whether he knows it or not, with God's charity, as one already loved by him who is love and in whose love we also abide. That is to say, our view of God, our theology, is made more expansive and more truthful when we walk in love,

and it is increased to a greater degree than even  
the best theological reflection can accomplish.

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Amen.