

4th SUNDAY OF LENT – A (March 19, 2023)

In my high school years in Britt I wasn't involved much in extra-curricular activities; certainly not in any sports which was not where my talents were and which held no interest for me at that time. But I was on our debate team during those four years (that may or may not surprise you...). I enjoyed that a lot, and it helped me learn about public speaking. And the highlight of my debate career: in my senior year we actually took first place in our division at a high school tournament hosted by Iowa State. We sure did better then in debate than the ISU men did in basketball Friday afternoon...and that's all I'm going to say about that...

I mention this because of this gospel we just heard that involves what we can call a debate between the man whose blindness Jesus cured and the Pharisees who again were trying to strengthen their case against Jesus who dared to cure this man on a Sabbath. This gospel is the second of three consecutive Sundays of longer-than-usual gospel passages. But unlike last Sunday's gospel of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well and next Sunday's gospel of Jesus bringing his dead friend Lazarus back to life, Jesus is not at the center of this long narrative. Yes, he cured the man's blindness at the very beginning of this passage and yes, he has a brief conversation with him at the very end...but otherwise, this passage is about the man--whose name we don't even know—and his 'debate' with the Pharisees.

He is brought up before the Pharisees more than once. And it's fascinating to see that the longer they kept questioning the man, the more courageous he became in speaking about Jesus. First, he simply said he didn't know where the man was who cured his blindness. Then he said 'he is a prophet'. Still later, he declared that Jesus had to be a 'man...from God'; otherwise, 'he would not have been able to do anything.' Finally, he declared to Jesus his belief that he is the 'Son of Man'. The more the Pharisees piled on, the stronger became the man's faith and his courage.

I recently came across an item in my files that I hadn't seen for awhile and that illustrates well the courage that comes to us when we really enter into the light of Christ and really embrace the truth that Jesus is. Some years ago at a west-coast college there was a philosophy professor who was a strong atheist who always tried to prove to his students that God did not exist. They were afraid to argue with him, and so they kept quiet. Every year, on the last day of class, he would say to his 300 students "If there is anyone here who still believes in Jesus, stand up!" For 20 years no one ever stood up; they knew what he would say next: "anyone who does believe in God is a fool. If God existed, he could stop this piece of chalk from hitting the ground and breaking...and yet he can't do it." And the professor would drop the chalk on the tile floor and shatter into pieces. The students would just stop, stare, and say nothing.

Then a freshman enrolled in this class; it was required for his major. He was a Christian and heard stories about this professor; he was afraid, but prayed every day for the courage to stand up on the last day of class. That last day came; the professor again said: "if anyone here still believes in God, stand up!" The freshman stood up, his classmates stared in shock, and the professor shouted 'You fool! If God existed, he could keep this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground!' But the chalk slipped out of his fingers, rolled off his shirt cuff, onto the pleats of his pants, down his leg, and off his shoe. As it hit the ground, it simply rolled away, unbroken. The professor's jaw dropped as he stared at the chalk, he looked up at the young man,

and then he left the classroom. The young man who stood up then walked to the front of the room and shared his faith in Jesus for the next 30 minutes; all 300 students stayed and listened as he told of God's love for them and of the saving power of Christ.

I share this story not to ridicule this professor; in fact, I encourage you to pray for him and for all others who also reject the God of Jesus Christ. Rather, I share it to show you what can happen when we really embrace Jesus, when we pray and when we really allow the power of his light and truth to shine in and through us—and that power is very real. It's what St. Paul told the Ephesians as we heard in the second reading: "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth."

The light of Christ does precisely that. The man born blind certainly came to know that. After receiving physical sight, he embraced and worshipped Jesus as the true light of the world and he did so with great joy and thanksgiving. Whether we engage in actual debates with nonbelievers or not, or even if we sometimes seem to debate within ourselves about what we believe, let's heed St. Paul's call to "live as children of light". No doubt about it--it takes courage to do so, and we live in a culture that is taking on more and more the mentality of that professor. But God's grace and our trusting prayer for his guidance will give us the courage of the man born blind who witnessed to the Pharisees and of that college freshman in the philosophy class. May we follow their examples.