

Along the track

The Sacraments

Jesus came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man to him and begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village where he spat on the ground and made a mud pack. He rubbed that on the man's eyes and then put his hands on him and asked, "Do you see anything?" He looked and said, "I see people; they look like trees walking around." Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes again and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly (Mk 8:22-25). It is dramatic isn't it. He could have just said 'be cured' and walked away but instead we have this ritual. There's a message in that.

Sacraments are not simply one-off celebrations, they are signs by which we remind ourselves just how much God loves us, how faithful God is to us, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. God doesn't need reminding of that, but we do. God is always active in our lives, but sometimes we don't see clearly, we don't see the message, we see like this man - only able to see 'people looking like trees walking around'. There are times when we need to do something to restore our vision.

Secondly, these friends who brought this blind man along to Jesus had heard about what he was saying and doing, how he was curing and forgiving, how he was empowering people, affirming them. They liked what they heard. Do we bring our children along for Baptism or Confirmation, to the Eucharist because we have heard about Jesus and we like what we have heard about him and his message?

What have we heard? We are people with a story. Those who come to follow Jesus share a story that goes back thousands of years, how we began as a wandering people, passing on stories, singing songs and psalms about God's love and care for us. We still hear how God entered into a covenant with these ancient peoples and us, 'I will be your God and you will be my people, I have carved your name on the palm of my hand!, You are precious in my sight and I love you', stories of how God protected them, guided them, lead them through thick and thin, we hear that *God is a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithful love, maintaining his love for a thousand generations, forgiving fault, crime and sin....* (Exodus 34:6).

Later, Jesus puts flesh and bones on that image of God. Pope Benedict wrote: "God has a face. God has a name. In Jesus, God became flesh." Now we can see more clearly, we hear the story of Jesus' life, his love and care for us, how he went about telling of God's love and forgiveness, not just in stories but by healing, reconciling people, forgiving people, how he invited those who may have gone astray to return, how he challenged people who preached the wrong message about God, but also gave those who chose to follow him a purpose, a mission in life. After Jesus, his followers met in their homes to share the story and celebrate it, to keep it alive. Just as we are asked to do.

When we celebrate the sacraments, we are reminded of all that in the readings that accompany the ritual. These are in a real sense our family stories and so we need to gather together to hear them, to celebrate them so then we can live them out ourselves. We can only do that when we can see clearly, when we become more sensitive to God's activity in our own lives.

We celebrate the sacraments to listen to that story again, to remind ourselves of that special love and care of God in a special way. Sacraments remind us that we are loved that we are precious in God's eyes.

Sacraments too are symbolic actions (like Jesus using the spittle), that use material things (bread, water, wine, gestures, oil, touch) to be more powerful and graphic than just words to help convey the message. In that we can more clearly understand how we encounter God. Sacraments are rituals which enable us to celebrate what is most meaningful and precious in our own human experience, life, death, love, finding purpose and meaning in our lives, compassion, healing, forgiveness, support, encouragement.

When we celebrate the sacraments each member of the family is singled out at some important stage of their lives to remind him or her that God is at work in your life, that God loves you!

Regards
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