

## The Belly of the Beast

At the age of 37, Jack Abbott wrote a book called *In the Belly of the Beast*. Since the age of 12, Abbott has spent all but one year of his life in reform schools and prisons. About 15 of these years have been spent in solitary confinement. One of his worst solitary experiences was the so-called "blackout" cell, which Abbott describes this way:

"It was in total darkness. Not a crack of light entered the cell. The darkness was so absolute it was like being in ink. The only light I saw was when I closed my eyes. Then there was before me a vivid burst of brilliance, of color, like fireworks. When I opened my eyes, it would vanish. My eyes hungered for light, for color, the way someone's dry mouth may hunger for saliva."

Compare Abbott's experience of his loss of light to the experience of another man named Evans. After being blind for 51 years, Evans received sight through an operation. Describing how it felt to see for the first time, he says, "It's the most amazing thing in the world. I can't wait to get up each day to see what I can see".

These two stories give us an insight into how the man born blind felt when Jesus gave him physical sight. He too probably hungered for light and color the way a dry mouth hungers for saliva. He too probably thought the gift of sight was the most amazing thing in the world. He too probably couldn't wait to get up each day to see what he could see. But the blind man's miracle of physical sight was nothing compared to the second miracle Jesus worked for him.

That was the miracle of spiritual sight, the gift of faith, which Jesus also gave him. And it is this second miracle, the gift of faith that John stresses in today's gospel. The first thing John implies is that the gift of faith takes place gradually, not all at once."

John describes the miracle as taking place in three stages. The first stage comes when some people ask the blind man about his cure. The blind man replies: "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went there and washed and was able to see." And so the blind man's first perception of Jesus is that he is a man, a remarkable man, but just a man.

The second stage in the blind man's gift of spiritual sight comes when the Pharisees quiz him.

They ask, "What do you have to say about [Jesus], since he opened your eyes?" The man replies, "He is a prophet." The blind man's answer reveals a growth in his understanding of Jesus. His spiritual vision of Jesus takes a giant leap forward. The more he thinks about what happened, the more convinced the blind man becomes that Jesus must be more than just another man. He must be a prophet; this brings us to the third stage of the blind man's perception of Jesus.

Later on in the day the blind man meets Jesus face-to-face. Recall that Jesus was no longer around when the man returned with his sight after washing in the pool of Siloam. Now,

Jesus looks into the man's eyes and says, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answers, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus responds, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he." "I do believe, Lord," the man replies, and he falls on his knees before Jesus. And so the man's spiritual vision of Jesus takes its final leap forward. He perceives Jesus to be more than a man. He perceives Jesus to be more than a prophet. He perceives Jesus to be the Lord, before whom "every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth." Philippians 2:10, and so the man's spiritual sight, his gift of faith, is far more miraculous than his gift of physical sight.

Let us close with these thoughts about our Lord and savior: Jesus comes to each one of us as he came to people in biblical times. He comes as a remarkable man. He speaks the same three words to us that he spoke to people in biblical times: "Come, follow me." And if we follow him, as did the people in biblical times, Jesus will reveal himself to us step by step. Then some morning, when the sun rises in the sky, we too will eventually come to see what they saw. Then we too will fall on our knees before Jesus and say to him, "We believe, Lord! We believe you are the Son of God!"

When you do this, you will know that truly ....

YOU ARE LOVED,

DEACON DAN