

## Corrective Vision

Daniel 10: 2-20a & Matthew 6: 22-23

*19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 7<sup>th</sup> August 2005/ Sacrament of Holy Communion*

It is so easy to skip right over these verses in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Following the Lord's Prayer, they are a series of short aphorisms or sayings, quick teachings. They are embedded between the well-known warning against storing up treasures on earth and how a disciple cannot serve both God and wealth (6:19-21), followed by Jesus' invitation for us to consider the lilies of the field, how they neither toil or spin with anxiety, but grow trusting in the providence of a loving Father (6: 24-34). Wedged into between these admonitions is a two-verse teaching about *sight*, which is easy to overlook and misunderstand. On this communion Sunday with the table before our *eyes*, ready for a feast, I would like to focus on just these two verses.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness.”

Now, if you were an ophthalmologist or optometrist, you probably would be taken aback by this verse: because Jesus' description of how the eye works is clinically incorrect. We understand the eye as a receptacle of light. The eye is a window that lets light in. We think of sight as contingent upon the ability of light to get into the eye. That's why cataracts and other obstructions need to be removed in order to improve sight.

*But how can the son of God who created you and me not know how the eye works? I think he does. There's more going on here than meets the eye.*

First of all, Jesus was merely reflecting the ancient understanding of how the eye actually works. They believed that the eye itself was a lamp; the eye actually the source of light. There are several similar references in scripture, also within paganism. We find in Proverbs, “The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the body (15:30).” The source of that light was deep within the self. It was the inner light that was mediated through the eyes and then projected out upon an object that accounts for seeing. The better the inner light, the better the lamp of the eye, better one's view of the world. Now if the inner light was bad or unsound, this meant the lamp of the eye would be unsound and dull, as well, which meant it would be really difficult for you to really see the world. An unsound inner light results in confusion – because you can't see – and eventually darkness. So that even in broad daylight, if your inner light was unsound or full of darkness, just think of the distorted perceptions you would have of the world. Just imagine how dark it would be if the lamp of your eye was dark, so that you would see, but not really *see*. You would have *vision*, but not sight. Your entire world would be distorted, your perspective perverted. For it is possible to walk with vision, but not really see. From a theological perspective or from a faith perspective, it is possible to see, but really be blind.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See M. Eugene Boring's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), p. 210.

Just before Jesus offers these words about seeing, he says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:21).” To talk of one’s *heart* was Jesus’ way of describing the core of the self, who we really are. There is a connection between the inner light and heart; a connection between one’s heart and the ability to see. To put it another way, what Jesus is getting at here is that in the kingdom of God his disciples *see with their hearts*. *The Christian sees with the heart*. When the heart has been transformed by the grace of God, then we look out with compassion upon the world. When the heart has been quickened by a sense of the overwhelming generosity of God, then we look out to the world struck by the sheer giftedness of life. The old world is renewed over and over again by the renewing of our hearts. Everything is transfigured when we look at everything and everyone in the world with hearts rooted in God’s love for us. This is why Christians see the world differently from everyone else – it just happens when we see with our hearts. In the Kingdom of God everything looks different; every living thing is the occasion of gratitude and rejoicing. The Christian perceives the world with a unique kind of depth that has its origins deep within the heart renewed and renewing by Christ. Even our attitude towards money changes when hearts are transformed. All of life becomes aligned with the generosity of God and we see the abundance set before us.

Do you see the world with your heart? Contemporary physics is showing us that to a remarkable degree that the world becomes as we see it. There’s a whole reality going on in front of our eyes but we cannot see it. “This is because we only see what we believe is possible and what we deem possible is contingent upon patterns of learned behavior. For example, there is an account of what it was like when Columbus’ ships first arrived in the Caribbean. The people of the islands could not see the ships sitting out there on the horizon, because it was unlike anything they had ever seen before. There was no knowledge in their brain, no experience of what clipper ships looked like. The shaman, the religious leader, stood along the shore looking out at the horizon and noticed some ripples out in the ocean, but no ship. He didn’t know the cause of the ripples. So he went out for several days and looked and looked and looked until eventually he began to see the ships. The shaman went and told others and because they placed their trust in him, they also began to see the ships.”<sup>2</sup> I learned about this account from watching the movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know,” which if you haven’t seen it, go and rent it (or buy it, which is what I did after renting it).

This is a powerful illustration showing that even though light was getting into their eyes, they still couldn’t see the ships. Which means maybe Jesus knew more about quantum physics and the physical make up of the world than he let on? There’s more going on around us all the time. We see what we believe is possible. We live in a participative universe; to a remarkable degree, the world becomes exactly what we bring to it.<sup>3</sup> How are we seeing the world? If our eye is dark, then the world becomes very dark indeed. How about us? What are we looking at, but not seeing? Is God’s abundance and presence at work, right in front of you, yet invisible? What’s preventing you from seeing? Like the natives trusting the shaman, we need to trust Jesus’ vision of the world and live in it. He will help us to see. We need help to see. Many poets, I think, can be trusted to help us see what we cannot see. We can be thankful for their sharp eye.

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<sup>2</sup> From the movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know,” Twentieth Century Fox, 2004

<sup>3</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Barret-Koehler Publishers, 1999), pp. 61ff.

The Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004) had a great eye. He was a Christian and looked out upon the world with such a view. He could find the ordinary as the occasion for extraordinary praise and wonder. Look at the poem on the front of the bulletin. He catches an ordinary street scene:

But a paraplegic in my street  
Whom they move together with his chair  
From shade to sunlight, sunlight to shade,  
Looks at a cat, a leaf, the chrome on an auto,  
And mumbles to himself, '*Beau temps, beau temps.*'

It is true. We have beautiful time  
As long as time is time at all.<sup>4</sup>

For the paraplegic, every living thing is the occasion for praise – *beau temps, beau temps*. So beautiful, beautiful time that allows us to see. The paraplegic sees what most of us would overlook and Milosz helps us to see the paraplegic, whom we might have missed. Jesus calls us to see.

And when we see – really see the kingdom before our eyes – we know it and everything changes with it. We finally see what we've been missing. Suddenly there is an illumination and what is illuminated is nothing less than sheer beauty. That's what R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) knew, the Welsh, Episcopal priest. Look at his poem, "The Bright Field."

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it.  
But that was the pearl of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have to possess it. Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.<sup>5</sup>

We only see what we think is possible. What do you see here in front of the pulpit? Just a table? Some bread and grape juice? Or is there something more? A feast, a feast of the people

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<sup>4</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, "A Mistake," *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1988), p. 222. See also T. M. Moore, "A Prophet in the Wasteland: The Christian Legacy of Czeslaw Milosz," *Theology Today* 62 (2005): 156-170.

<sup>5</sup> R. S. Thomas, "The Bright Field," selected and edited by Anthony Thwaite (London: Everyman, 2000), p. 87.

of God, in the kingdom of God, of abundance. What do you see? Do you see the joyful feast of the people of God? Can you see it?

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