

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (LAETARE SUNDAY)

Disrupting the illusion

FR CHARLO CAMILLERI, O.CARM.



Today's readings: 1 Samuel 16:1b-13a, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41

In his classic essay *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), Jun'ichirō Tanizaki reflects on a beauty that is often overlooked. Western culture, he suggests, tends to pursue brightness, clarity and brilliance, what he calls a kind of "garish" illumination. Japanese aesthetics, by contrast, discover elegance in dimness, the gentle interplay between light and shadow.

Shadows, Tanizaki writes, are not simply the absence of light; they create depth, mystery and a contemplative dimension. When everything is flooded with artificial brightness, something fragile and profound is lost.

Tanizaki's insight offers a striking lens through which to approach Laetare Sunday where we are invited to pause for a moment as the shadows of

Holy Week begin to gather. The liturgy invites us to reflect not only on Jesus as the light, but also on a deeper vision emerging through shadow.

The narrative in John's gospel of a man born blind reveals Jesus's logic: human shadows are the place where "the works of God might be made visible".

Healing itself is earthy and intimate. Jesus mixes saliva with dust to make mud and places it on the man's eyes. Humble, tactile elements of the earth become instruments and signs of the new creation.

Tanizaki would recognise something here. He praises humble and overlooked materials that possess quiet depth rather than polished brilliance. Jesus's gesture recalls the creation story itself: humanity is formed from the dust of the earth as God forms life not in bypassing the material world, but working through it.

Sent to wash in the Pool of the Sent (Siloam), the blind man must walk there guided only by trust. Only after this leap does he receive sight. Faith, the gospel suggests, often unfolds in precisely this way: walking within the shadows before the light becomes clear.

Ironically he gradually comes to see more and more clearly, recognising Jesus as Lord.

Meanwhile, religious authorities, confident in their own vision, reveal their blindness. Their certainty resembles the sterile brightness Tanizaki criticised: a light without depth, unable to perceive the unfolding mystery before them. They cling blindly to the illusion of power, control and order.

But Jesus's healing sign of the Reign disrupts their illusion. The prevailing belief that disability was a punishment for sin is quietly overturned. The man who had lived marginalised, suddenly becomes empowered to challenge the authorities. Now that he sees, he becomes an outcast from the same system that marginalised him. Even his parents reject him. Yet that exclusion becomes the moment he gains freedom to detach from the old system, and become attached to Christ, finding his place in the community of faith.

The first reading echoes the same theme of deeper sight. When the prophet Samuel arrives to anoint a new king, he naturally assumes that Jesse's strongest and most impressive

of sons must be the chosen one. Moving beneath appearances, into the hidden depths of the heart, "the Lord" who "does not see as mortals see," indicates that the overlooked one is the chosen: David.

Similarly, Psalm 23 points to "the valley of deepest shadow" where there is no fear, since the shepherd walks beside his flock, guiding and protecting it.

As Tanizaki observes in another context, it is often the subtle elements of a space (here, the staff and rod) that give it its true character. The Apostle brings the reflection to its conclusion: "Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light", exposing injustice and empowering the marginal.

Authentic vision rarely comes through dazzling brilliance alone. It radiates in the discarded places of shadow, in humility, even in suffering. It is there that our eyes slowly learn to see.

Like the man heading to Siloam still covered in mud, we too move forward by trust until our eyes gradually behold a deeper light: Christ.

CHARLO.CAMILLERI@UM.EDU.MT

QUOTES & NEWS

Cardinal condemns war

In a March 7 statement entitled "A Call to Conscience", Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago criticised as "sickening" a video by Trump's administration treating the war as a video game.

"Hundreds of people are dead, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, including scores of children who made the fatal mistake of going to school that day. Six US soldiers have been killed. They are also dishonoured by that social media post. Hundreds of thousands displaced, and many millions more are terrified across the Middle East..."

"Our government is treating the suffering of the Iranian people as a backdrop for our own entertainment, as if it's just another piece of content to be swiped through while we're waiting in line at the grocery store. But, in the end, we lose our humanity when we are thrilled by the destructive power of our military."

Pray that bombs cease

Pope Leo XIV appealed for prayers for peace at the end of his Angelus address last Sunday, March 8.

"Dear brothers and sisters, deeply disturbing news continues to arrive from Iran and the entire Middle East. In addition to the onerous of violence..."