

In the ancient world, illnesses and conditions such as blindness were often understood as outward signs of sin. In the long version of the gospel—which you should read at home—this prompts a question from the disciples about who sinned: the man born blind or his parents. Jesus responded by saying that neither had sinned, it was so that God’s works might be made visible through the man born blind. Jesus then goes on to heal the man which John identified as Jesus’ fifth sign. More about signs later.

With this particular sign, theologians such as Saint Augustine have written that blind man represents humanity afflicted by original sin. You can probably read what Augustine wrote on your own by doing an internet search for “Saint Augustine Man born blind. The one caution I would make is that it can be misunderstood as saying humankind was created in a state of original sin. We weren’t: read the first creation account of Genesis. Mankind was created on the sixth day and then God looked on all he made and saw that it was very good. In the beginning, humans were not created in a state of original sin. We were created in a state of original grace. What happened? In the inspired poetry of Genesis, we were bitten by a serpent and its venom became part of our spiritual DNA. In the days before antivenom, how was a snakebite treated? A mud poultice was often used. Mud cools and it was believed that it could draw out the venom. Although I have never been bitten by a snake, I have been stung by every type of bee we have around here and I know from experience that mud does help. Jesus made clay from his saliva and the ground. That clay acted like a poultice and drew the poison of original sin out of the man which he then washed off. With original sin removed, now the guy can see.

There is another level to this. This healing miracle was a sign, meaning it points to something beyond itself. Actually it is a double sign. First, it points to Jesus’ identity as the promised messiah. Healing the blind is a messianic sign and in this case it required the power of God to accomplish.

The second sign is that it shows Jesus continuing his journey of restoration that we have been hearing about all Lent. This takes us back once again to Genesis. Nothing was growing upon the earth because God had sent no rain and there was no man to till the soil. So God formed man out of the dust of the earth and breathed into his nostrils and the man became a living being. God put the man in the center of the garden to cultivate and care for it and for a while we lived in harmony with God, each other, and the rest of creation in the lushness of the Garden of Eden. Then we were bitten, poisoned, and everything fell apart.

In today's gospel, Jesus didn't recreate humanity from scratch but his actions recall our original creation. In Genesis, God took the dry ground/dust and his spirit into it to make it a living human being. In the gospel Jesus mixed dry earth with his saliva which he smeared upon the blind man's eyes. He didn't give him physical life; instead he gave him supernatural life. Beyond drawing the poison of original sin out of the blind man and giving him the light of faith, hope, and love, the act of placing the mud (a mixture of dust of the earth and Jesus' saliva) is symbolically giving back to the man his original nature.

Jesus wants to do the same for us. God did not create us for evil; he does not want anything bad for us. Jesus wants to heal us of our blindness and help us to see the greatness for which we were created. He wants to remove the serpent's poison from us so that we can truly get to know him. It is only when we can see ourselves the way Jesus sees us that we can be truly healed and return to live in harmony with God and each other.