

Sunday 22nd March 2020 - 4th Sunday of Lent - John 9

The Gospel reading for today is followed by the brief talk and prayers of intercession that would have been given at the 9.00am service by Revd Mike Ketley.

The reading today, the whole of John chapter 9, here from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), is unusually lengthy, but it is well worth reading in full:

John chapter 9, verses 1 to the end (RSV)

Jesus heals a blind man

As he passed by, Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.

We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; when night comes no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

As he said this, he spat on the ground and made clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

Disagreement about the healing

The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he"; others said, "No, but he is like him." He said, "I am the man."

They said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.

Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see.

" Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" There was a division among them. So they again said to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

Conflict over the healing

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age, ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner." He answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?"

And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Jesus finds the man born blind

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you." He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshipped him.

Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

TALK

All the Gospels record instances of Jesus restoring the sight of blind people, either by simply touching their eyes, or by first spitting on his hands before touching their eyes, or, as in our reading, John 9, making a healing mud-pack from spittle before putting it on the eyes of the man born blind from birth.

There is a story about two previously blind men, now with their sight restored by Jesus standing by the roadside as Jesus walked by with the disciples. The first man said: *"That Jesus is wonderful, he cured my blindness you know."* The second man replied: *"well, that's amazing, because he cured my blindness as well. He just touched my eyes and I could see again."* The first man then became angry and said: *"Rubbish, you're making it up. He has to make mud with his spittle first, and then put it on your eyes, and then you go and wash it off in the pool of Siloam, that's the way he cures blindness!"* The second man retorted: *"It's you that is lying. He doesn't need conjuring tricks with mud, all he does is touch your eyes, that's how he does it!"*

And there you have it - two ways of seeing Jesus, the muddites, and the anti-muddites. The story is fictional, but as the Gospel reading shows, even the miracles of Jesus caused dissent and division among some of those who witnessed them. In this case, the zealous and jealous

Pharisees condemned Jesus as a sinner for performing a miracle on the Sabbath - technically working, and so breaking the law. The man Jesus had healed however, saw him as a prophet, to the displeasure of the Pharisees, who questioned him. In disbelief; these religious leaders even interviewed the parents of the man, who confirmed that he had been blind from birth, but could now see.

John goes on to explain that when questioned for a second time, the man again confirmed all that had happened, and openly said that he believed that, far from being a sinner, Jesus was from God, whereupon his inquisitors, fearful for their own authority, condemned him also as a sinner and threw him out of the synagogue. Jesus, however, immediately sought him out and assured him of the divine validity of his healing, again challenged by Pharisees, still keeping a beady eye on him.

Now comes the sting in the tail: Jesus said: *“I came into this world for judgement, so that those who do not see should see, and those who do see may become blind”*. The Pharisees’ response was: *“surely we are not blind, are we?”* Jesus said: *“If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say: ‘we see’, your sin remains.”*

It was not physical blindness, but spiritual blindness, that the Pharisees were guilty of. They chose not to see what was going on before their very eyes - they claimed to see, but were blind to what God was showing them in Jesus. It is not however what this miracle said to the Pharisees that concerns us, but, 2000 years on, what it means to us. To summarise John chapter 9: following Christ means accepting our blindness, and allowing the light and love of Christ to open our eyes to the truth about him, and about ourselves.

In his brilliant commentary 'Readings In St John's Gospel', Archbishop William Temple, commenting on John chapter 9, offers incisive wisdom on human nature:

What we may not do, yet we all strive to do, is to keep our eyes half-open and live by half the light. That kind of sight holds us to our sin and our sin to us. But the only way of avoiding it is to look with eyes wide open upon ourselves and the world as the full light reveals it; but this is the surrender of faith, and pride resists it. (Readings in St. John's Gospel page161)

Ouch! and Amen

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O God, help us to know and accept the unvarnished truth about ourselves and with eyes wide open, and ears willing to listen, discover daily the wonder of your life giving truth and love in Jesus Christ your son; that with sins forgiven our life on earth may be blessed by our hope of heaven.

Silence

Response Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of love and compassion, in this time of crisis, with so many suffering illness, thousands of lives ending, and the searing pain of bereavement, we pray for everyone affected by the corona virus sweeping across the whole world. May all who are striving to combat this disease, politicians, medical experts, hospital staff, carers, worried parents and relatives, we ourselves, be given continued wisdom, strength and determination to overcome every obstacle until this terrible time is past.

Silence

Response Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord, let your healing love shine upon those we know personally who are sick or troubled in any way and those who have recently been bereaved. Comfort and calm those who live alone. Reassure those whose have lost their employment or whose livelihood is threatened and help us all to help one another.

Silence

Response Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Almighty God, let your hand of blessing rest upon us and upon all those we love, this day and every day. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Response Amen

