

The Man Born Blind **Fourth Sunday of Lent in Year A**

John 9:1-41

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry as I heard that gospel story. I wanted to laugh at the innocence of the man born blind. I wanted to cry at the dullness, the stupidity, the blindness of the Pharisees.

It is in some ways a pretty simple story of a blind man who was healed. Nothing complicated there you might think. But it was for the Pharisees. You see Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. And for the Pharisees that was unacceptable. And so there began a kind of pantomime as they tried to show that Jesus cannot possibly have done a good thing. He cannot possibly have done the will of God by healing a man born blind. They began by quizzing the man himself who gave a disarmingly simple explanation of what took place:

He put mud on my eyes.
Then I washed
and now I see....

So after much humming and haaing they found the man's elderly parents and suggested that he was not born blind at all. But the parents simply assert that he had been and that was all they knew.

So then the Pharisees had another go at the man himself who stuck doggedly to his story

One thing I do know,
that though I was blind,
now I see.

But they still pestered him and the man became quite frustrated

I have told you already and you would not listen.
Why do you want to hear it again?
Do you also want to become his disciples?

I would have loved to have been there at that moment. That question, 'Do you want to become his disciples?' - was it asked innocently? Or was the man trying to be provocative? And I would loved to have seen the Pharisees' reactions.

The man persisted in his loyalty to Jesus and as a result the Pharisees drove him away to be sought out by Jesus whereon the man made a simple profession of faith

Lord I believe.

It feels like the inevitable culmination of his healing. He accepts what happens to him joyfully, gladly, with an open heart, with a clear inward sight.

But it provokes a searching response from the Pharisees:

Surely we are not blind are we?

The answer, of course, is 'Yes.' With that question the healing miracle explicitly takes on a new significance. No longer is it just about a physical disability. It is now about a spiritual disability. The man with a physical blindness is healed; the men with spiritual blindness are not. The Pharisees had never been outwardly blind; but inwardly they were profoundly sightless. But the difference between them and the man born blind is that the man born blind knew what he lacked: until that moment the Pharisees did not. Or if they did, they chose to ignore it.

Throughout the bible there is a long association of outward sight, or hearing and inward blindness or deafness. At the call of Isaiah as a prophet God said to him

"Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening,
but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.'

Isaiah 6:9

Jesus quotes this passage when he says of the people of his own time:

This is why I speak to them in parables,
because seeing they do not see,
and hearing they do not hear,
nor do they understand.

Matthew 13:13 ESV

The inward blindness of the Pharisees is more in need of healing than the outward blindness of the man born blind.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to ask for what they wanted in prayer:

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.

Mathew 7:7

But this teaching is set in the context of another:

But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 6:3

Before we can pray effectively we need to be able to see what it is we ought to ask for. The point Jesus is making is that what God most wants to work in the world is his justice so he wants us to pray for that. And if we pray for the Kingdom of God he will give us the food and clothing we need.

Perhaps S James had the same point in mind when he wrote

You do not have, because you do not ask.
You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly,
in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

James 4:3

But we begin with what we can see, with what we do want. Asking for healing is not about spending on our pleasures. It is far more important than that. And I guess for many people it is physical healing that counts, just as it did for the man born blind. But there is a healing even more important than that of our bodies and that is of our relationship with God. It is our spiritual blindness, our spiritual deafness, our spiritual lameness. This spiritual blindness leads to the obsession with pleasures that so dismayed St James; it leads to the obsession with rules and etiquette that so damaged the Pharisees and angered Jesus.

But the starting point is that we tell God what we want. And then he shows us what he intends to give us. Sometimes the two are the same. Sometimes they are not.

N Clews
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