

WHO IS REALLY BLIND?

1 Samuel 15. 1-13

Ephesians 5. 8-14

John 9. 1-41

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The long gospel passage that we have just heard is widely recognised as a masterpiece of St John's storytelling. The story is marked by a unity of time, space and theme; and if we were adapting it for a theatre production, we would be justified in splitting it up into seven separate scenes, when no more than two active characters appear on stage at one time. The story's literary beauty was captured by Sir Edward Elgar in an early (1896) oratorio, called *The Light of Life*. Some of you who are Elgar fans might be interested in listening to it sometime.

When most of us hear or read this story, our first reaction is to see it as a story that recounts a miracle. And indeed it does. As our Lord leaves the Temple in Jerusalem during the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, he passes by a man who has been blind since birth. In a surprising gesture, Jesus spits on the ground and uses the spittle to make clay, which he then uses to anoint the man's eyes. He then instructs the man to go and wash at the pool of Siloam, a freshwater reservoir in Jerusalem that was frequented by Jews making religious pilgrimages to the Holy City. As the man washes at the pool, his sight is miraculously restored. Once again, Christ has enabled a blind man to see, and by this act confirms again that he is indeed the Son of God.

There is, however, more going on here than just a miracle. This story is a story of faith. That becomes clear when we consider everything the man who was born blind had to overcome. He is really the main character of the story; and as John tells it, he

hopes that we who hear it and read it will have our own vision restored. In order to help us, John presents this story with several other characters, each of whom suffers from spiritual blindness.

Firstly, there were our Lord's disciples. They suffered from the blindness of theological ineptness. It was their understanding that the man was born blind because of his sins. That was a common belief in their day. If you did something wrong, God punished you with some malady. You may not have been the guilty person. You could have inherited that malady through the sins of your parents. Jesus negates that belief when he says, 'neither this man, nor his parents sinned'.

We humans have a tendency, do we not, to make judgements about people who are sick, physically challenged or abnormal. We wonder what it was that they did that has now resulted in some imperfection. Or sometimes we say that their problems are a result of the dysfunctional family they came from. Think of the number of times you have heard comments like the following: 'No wonder the guy has a drinking problem, his father was the same;' or, 'You'd have a temper too if your family was Irish;' or, 'What do you expect from a person who lives on the other side of the tracks?' The list goes on and on.

Secondly, there were the neighbours. They were blinded by denial. 'Wasn't this guy the beggar?' 'No, it can't be; he was a blind man.' The (now no longer) blind man insists that the beggar and he are indeed the same man, but they do not believe him.

Denial is a form of blindness that occurs when we are not willing to see what is real. Denial is essentially disbelief. Psychologists call denial a defence mechanism. It is a coping tool that people use to reject what is true. Sometimes people use it to resist change.

Thirdly, there were the Pharisees. They suffered from several kinds of blindness, one of which was the blindness of righteous indignation. How dare Jesus break the rules and heal someone on the Sabbath! They said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath...How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' They did not appreciate the fact that Christ violated one of the Jewish laws.

Unfortunately, there can be times when rules and social customs discourage us from reaching out to others; and they therefore deny us the opportunity of being agents of God's grace. We may be tempted to become rigid instead of flexible; and closed instead of open.

Fourthly, there were the blind man's parents. They suffered from the blindness of selfishness. They didn't want to lose their seats in the synagogue. As our text tells us, 'They were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.' Rather than believe their own son, they chose to distance themselves from him in order to save themselves.

And finally, there were the Pharisees and Jewish authorities who make a second appearance. They suffered from the blindness of rejection. They reject the cured blind man and drive him away from their presence; but they also (on a more fundamental level) reject what Christ has done for him; and they reject the revelation that our Lord has given them that his works are in fact the works of God.

The poor blind man was surrounded by a community who all suffered from some form of spiritual blindness. Sadly, no one acknowledged that a miracle had taken place. No one rejoiced or praised God for the man's ability to see. No one asked him what it felt like to be able to see his family for the first time. Instead of being

excited that God had intervened and helped a man to gain his sight, they all rejected him because of his profession of faith.

When we have faith, we *see*. We see that God works in our midst, in spite of ourselves. Unfortunately, sometimes we are like one of the other four character groups in the story. Like them, we are spiritually blind; and we can find ourselves reluctant to allow God to correct our vision.

All of society rejected the blind man who could now see clearly. There was, however, one exception. That was our Lord. He went looking for the man, found him, and affirmed his faith. Jesus said to him, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see, may see.'

Christ is all about opening our eyes to see. He has a cure for all of our vision problems. He doesn't want to give us glasses. He knows we're careless. He knows we'll take them off and forget where we left them. Our Lord wants to give us a transplant. He wants us to see the world through his eyes... and what a vision it is. Through the eyes of Jesus, we are given a new view of other people. Through the eyes of Jesus, we have a whole new perspective on routine frustrations and rude surprises. Through the eyes of Jesus, we see the big picture; we see purpose and direction in our lives.

That's the difference between blindness and vision. It is not a function of lenses and retinas. It is the will to see...and the will to *believe*. Through his life, death and resurrection, Christ has given us new eyes to see. He offers us a far better vision of what life can be. He offers love and joy. He offers serenity and fulfilment. He offers eternal life. It's all there for us to see. Just keep your eyes open; and keep looking towards the light. Amen.