

### Opened eyes, closed hearts.

Our gospel reading today began as Jesus and his disciples were walking through Jerusalem on their way from the temple. They saw a man who was blind, and somehow they know he had been blind from birth.

Back then, it was commonly thought that when some tragedy or illness occurred, it was God's way of punishing people for their sin, and the disciples ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Whose fault was it?

And of course, people ponder why God allows bad things to happen. Why does God allow suffering? A common response is because in some way it's our fault. We bring it on ourselves. Our greed. Our lust. Our pride.

In a way, it's a very arrogant view – because if things are our fault, then we can fix them.

And it's also a very selfish view – because if someone else is suffering, it must be their fault, and their responsibility to fix their situation – so why should we help them?

Or, if God is the cause of their suffering, then if they just do more good deeds, or give more, or pray harder or more often, or make the right the sacrifices, then they can get God to fix things for them.

But in our reading today, Jesus gives us a different understanding. He tells his disciples – and us – that this man's blindness has nothing to do with some sin in this man's life or his parent's. God is not punishing him. God is not punishing his parents. God is not angry with them.

That is not why bad things happen in the world. God is not punishing individuals or the world at large. We've all done wrong. We've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as Paul tells the Romans (Romans 3:23). For most people, and for most of us, most of the time, things are good. We have food and drink and shelter, and we belong to families and communities that care for us. And we're not dodging thunderbolts from heaven. Every day God shows his love and pours out his blessings, in spite of our sin and the fact that we do not deserve his blessings. And that's not just for us who are followers of Jesus, or are in some way "good people" – Jesus said in the sermon on the mount: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)

God's response to us is love, not anger. The Psalmist reflects that, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10).

But if not for some sin, why is there suffering? Why was this man born blind?

Jesus tells us "...this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (9:3-5)

And then, Jesus displays the work of God in the man! He spits on the ground and made some mud and put in on the man's eyes, and sends the man to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Sure enough, he went and washed, and came home miraculously able to see.

I think we can get used to the stories of Jesus' miracles, and not really grasp how 'miraculous' they were or are. Jesus encounters person in need, Jesus makes some spittle-mud and puts it on their eyes, or touches the person, or the person touches him, or the person just trusts him, or Jesus just chooses to meet the need, and the need is met.

The natural world does not work that way. The change that Jesus brings about is supernatural. It is beyond our experience. It is – at least at some level – unbelievable. And we see that unbelief in the way the man's neighbours and others react (9:8-9) – 'it's not him, it only looks like him'.

The man born blind insists it is him, and that Jesus has healed him.

It seems something supernatural may have happened, so what do they do? Praise God? Drop everything and follow Jesus?

No. They go see the Pharisees. And Pharisees, generally, aren't fans of Jesus. And in the Pharisees investigation of this miracle, they realise that it had happened on the Sabbath. Hmm. Jesus had made mud and put it on the man's eyes... This is a problem, they realise, because making mud, is work under the Jewish Law, and you must not work on the Sabbath.

Aha! Some of them think they've got Jesus: "He's not from God, because he doesn't keep the Sabbath!".

Others aren't so sure... after all, how could a sinner do such miraculous signs?

More investigation is needed. Let's ask the man. And the man says that Jesus is clearly a prophet.

Not convinced, the Pharisees ask the man's parents. The man's parents agree that yes, this is their son, who was born blind, and yes, now it seems he can see. But we know nothing more. Ask him.

John helpfully tells us that his parents were non-committal because they were afraid of being excluded from the synagogue if they acknowledged Jesus was the messiah.

So they try again, demanding that the man, under oath, declare that Jesus was a sinner (9:24).

The man gives a great response in verse 27... "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

While we might think that this was, indeed, a great response. The Pharisees were distinctly unimpressed: Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." (9:28-29)

They are becoming increasingly angry, but the man is becoming more and more resolved to speak the truth. "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (9:30-33)

This is a remarkably brave response too, but I guess he has experienced the miraculous power of Jesus in giving him sight, so he is pretty certain of what he's talking about.

The Pharisees can't argue with what the man says, so they take the traditional approach of shooting the messenger: "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out. (9:34)

The blind man could certainly see... but the Pharisees couldn't. There was this miracle that had happened, and they couldn't see it.

The man was born blind, but the Pharisees had chosen to become blind – spiritually blind. They'd closed their hearts to the possibility that God was bigger than their traditions said. Closed to their hearts to God – and they used God's commands to justify closing their hearts.

This gospel account shows us that spiritual blindness is worse than physical blindness. Physical blindness could be healed, but spiritual blindness resisted healing and resisted the truth. Physical blindness no fault of the blind man nor of his parents, but the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees was a choice. They intentionally miss that the man's healing is a miracle – a sign from God about who Jesus is. And in the face of that miracle, all they can do is to criticize Jesus for doing it on the wrong day.

The blind man wasn't clear on who Jesus was, but he had the evidence of being able to see. He was no scholar of the scriptures, he was no theologian or philosopher – but he chose not to be spiritually blind to Jesus said, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:24-25). He didn't understand how the miracle worked. He didn't yet know that Jesus was the messiah, but from the evidence he knew that Jesus was from God.

He had been blind, and now he could see. That he knew!

The Pharisees were blind to Jesus. And they were determined to keep it that way. They approached the whole incident, and Jesus himself, with closed hearts. They were determined not to see what was obvious. Their blindness, their spiritual blindness, was a choice.

Jesus heard about what happened, and sought out the man. Jesus didn't say "Thanks for sticking up for me" or "Thanks for speaking the truth", instead, Jesus asked him "Do you believe in the Son of man?"

The 'Son of Man' is a way of referring to Jesus that he often used himself. It brings to mind the passage from the book of Daniel (7:13-14) "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

When Jesus asks the healed man if he believes in the Son of Man, he's asking not if the son of man exists, but if he's prepared to put his trust in the one who will bring judgement and healing into the world. It points to the fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah 35:5-6 – "then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert."

The Son of Man is the messiah. The one who will, ultimately, put all things right.

"Do you believe in him?" Jesus asks the man. And I think, he asks us too. Do you trust in him?

Messiah is a great concept. The Pharisees would have agreed with the concept of messiah – the problem they had was the messiah actually arriving on the scene.

"Who is he, sir?" the man asked, "Tell me so that I may believe in him".

The man is coming to a proper understanding of who Jesus is. He's not just a prophet, as he declared to the pharisees earlier. He's not just a healer and worker of miracles. I

And Jesus tells him the full story: "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you".

The man's response was instant, and it was complete. Verse 38: Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

In the last two weeks in church we've looked at the stories in John's gospel of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, and the Samaritan woman at the well. Each time, they have had an exchange with Jesus which leads them to the realisation of who Jesus is. And here near the end of chapter 9, the man born blind has a similar realisation.

Do we come to a similar realisation? There are plenty of people in the world today who will accept some things about Jesus – often that he was a wise teacher, or a moral leader. Some will accept him as a prophet. But what Jesus calls us to do, is to come to the same realisation as the man born blind did. In the face of opposition from society, from family and neighbours, will we acknowledge Jesus as the one who will put all things right? Will we do so even if we're going to be ridiculed or ostracised?

Later in John's gospel (12:47), Jesus says "I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world." And that's something I often come back to, but here in Chapter 9, Jesus tells the man born blind "For judgment I have come into this world..." How do we hold those two statements?

Sure enough – Jesus didn't come to condemn, but to save. But to save the world, to put all things right – to bring about God's kingdom – something has to be done about what's wrong. And to do something about what is wrong, what is wrong needs to be identified – to be judged.

The book of Revelation tells us that in the restoration of all things, blindness, rejection, death and sin will be no more. We will hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." And he who is seated on the throne will say, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:3-5).

So Jesus says "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (9:39).

And the Pharisees who heard this asked "What? Are we blind too?"

Clearly, they're not physically blind. But Jesus is certainly accusing them – judging them – of spiritual blindness. Of seeing the evidence – and ignoring it.

You might remember the account of John the Baptist sending his disciples to ask Jesus if he is messiah or if they should wait for someone else, and Jesus responds with "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (Matthew 11:4-5).

But the Pharisees had closed hearts. They physically saw man's blindness had been healed but chose not to 'see' it for what it was, and what it showed about Jesus.

Jesus finishes the exchange by saying "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

If they hadn't seen the evidence of who Jesus was, they wouldn't have been guilty of closing their hearts to him. But they saw the evidence, and they closed their hearts to it.

So what does that mean for us, two thousand odd years later, and far removed from meeting a man with his sight restored on the streets of Jerusalem?

We have the biblical witness of what Jesus did. Not just making the lame walk and the deaf hear and the blind see. But also fulfilling God's plan to open the way to restoring all who turn to him in faith by offering himself by his death on the cross.

And we have the Holy Spirit working in our lives and in our hearts to convince us of the truth.

Even as those around us close their hearts to the message of Jesus, let's keep our eyes open. And not only open, but focused on Jesus.

We know only too well that things do not always work out the way we want them to. There is hunger, thirst, conflict, despair and sickness across our world. The question is: Will we trust in Jesus, and witness to him, as the man born blind did? Will we keep our hope in him?

All of us are born blind and in need of Jesus' touch. And one day our healing will be complete on that day when God will make everything new. It is the promise of God, brought about through Jesus who touched the eyes of a blind man and made him see. And the most important thing he saw, was Jesus.

Amen.