

**Sunday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, Lent 4A**

**Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-3, Psalm 23, Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9:1-41**

### **Introduction**

*“If you ain’t any better than a Nigger son, then who are you better than?”* The words of Agent Anderson to Agent Ward, in the film “Mississippi Burning”, a dramatic account of the struggle of the Johnson Administration to bring the southern states of the US into line with federal civil rights legislation, where Anderson reflects upon his daddy’s southern view of the world and his place in it.

I want to do two things today: first to think about the real world and the way we think about ourselves. Second, I want to think about this magnificent reading of the Blind Man from John’s Gospel, for it sheds penetrating light upon Jesus’ understanding of the human condition, and in so doing helps us take up a more informed, judicious interpretation of ourselves, of our communities, of the world.

### **Some Initial Thoughts: The Way We Think about Ourselves**

You know; I have spent much of my life caught between conflicting camps: part of each and critical of both. The Christian camp, I experienced as preoccupied with sin and guilt. During my chaplaincy at Newington College, I asked one of the teaching staff, Alex, a Catholic, to help me distribute wafers to the students at Communion. During the distribution, I noted his hand uncontrollably shaking, as if he were under some stress. I later asked how he was, and apologized if I had requested something, he had felt uncomfortable with. He replied, that it was not the distribution that had been the problem, but his sense of inadequacy. With that, he explained how he had been brought up Sunday by Sunday in the Mass, being harassed and hounded with the charge of being a sinner. “To quote the author, JD Salinger, “we are all ‘apple eaters’”. He continued, “this never leaves you; it strips you of your confidence, belittles you, diminishes your humanity”. This was not the first person I had experienced in the Australian-Irish Catholic world, who had suffered theological abuse. It was and is an example of an enculturated popularist Christian faith that has seriously fallen short of a balanced Christian understanding of the human person and human society.

On the other hand, I have rubbed shoulders with quite secular people: philosophical liberals, progressives, in Latin America, Marxists, who have a more generous view of the human being. Unaccepting of the word sin – after all it is perceived as an exclusively Christian term – they are generally more positive about the progress of human beings and human history. They dismantle heaven, but look forward to a perfect human nature, scoff at miracles but in the very same breath, believe in the perfectibility of the human race.

I found myself torn between these two equally unacceptable positions: what to do, between Christians crippled by their sense of sin, and secularists, who have *no* sense of sin? The first group does not dare to do much at all, because they are clear that all their actions are already tainted. The second group, do damage because they are blissfully unaware of their own brokenness.

### **Jesus and the Blind Man**

John's story of Jesus and the Blind Man offers us a way forward: so that we can avoid being either psychologically crippled, giving up on the world, or psychologically naïve about ourselves. I want to make just two points about this story, for it speaks about sin, about "apple-eating", but in a way that contributes, encourages, promotes our self-understanding, our sense-of-self.

**First, for Jesus, sin is not about breaking the rules, the conventions, but about breaking people.** Usually religious people, Christian or otherwise, understand sin to be an offence against God, a transgression of God's law, rules. Once rules are adopted, the next step is to work out who are those who fulfil them and who do not, who are our allies and who are not. From there, the community is divided between the righteous and the unrighteous, the washed and the unwashed, the graced and the ungraced: a sort of binary approach to life. This is precisely the problem raised in Jesus' confrontation with the religious heavies, the Pharisees: to draw from JD Salinger's quote, the world is divided between "non-apple eaters" and "apple eaters". In our story, the blind man is the quintessential "apple-eater": In some way or another, he or his parents have broken the rules and his physical defect irrefutably confirms that sin. Today, we speak less overtly of sinners, but *outsiders, outcasts*, determined by religious, cultural and economic structures, exist all the same and they are considered for all intents and purposes as sinners. It is not difficult to identify a very significant group in current Australian society, who are identified in this way: the recipients of Newstart benefits, whose support is intentionally maintained at the lowest possible level, indeed a level which they can neither live or function on. The situation with the thousands on Newstart is one of our society's greatest scandals.

Now, when we turn to Jesus response, we find a dramatic change in perspective. In the Christian memory, in the Church's memory, as it looks back upon the history of the exclusion, rejection, and crucifixion of Jesus, sin takes on an altogether different tone. Sin is not located in the supposed defect of the person or group of people who are excluded from acceptance and hospitality, but is located at the other end of the equation: *in the act of excluding, the withdrawal of hospitality*. This is the point of the conversation between Ward and Anderson. Anderson's father, an angry poor white farmer, sees the black neighbour as a sinner, an outsider, an outcast, someone who has fallen short because of his racial

difference. The truth is other than that: it is he, Anderson's father, who sins as he excludes, persecutes and breaks Monroe down by killing his mule and driving him out. Sin is grounded in the shocking statement: *If you ain't any better than a Nigger son, then who are you better than?*"

**The Second point is this: that sin is not just personal: it is systemic, it is structural.** In the Gospel reading, it is not just the attitude of a few malevolent Pharisees that is the problem. Digging deeper, it is the religious-social superstructure behind their attitudes, inherited through their ancient theological mythology that determines the view that handicapped people are handicapped because of prior sin. This sort of mythology is *a lie*, that imposes injustice and death. Again, the very sort of thing we witness in the film clip: Anderson's father, does not make up the mythology of black inadequacy (sin) alone: he has assimilated Jim Crow, internalized Jim Crow, integrated Jim Crow from childhood.

Yes, sin does exist. To be obsessed with it is destructive, to ignore it is foolhardy. What we do need to do is to discern it, to critically think through how it operates in our world, personally, religiously, culturally and economically. The basic sign of its presence for Jesus, is exclusion, scapegoating and broken people. To move beyond it, is to think beyond the straight line to "the curved line", as the Spanish architect, Gaudí, put it, "to love people we are not taught to love", as John Shelby Spong, said.