

The Healing of the Man Born Blind, 19 March 2023

1 Samuel 16.1-13; Ps 36.5-10; Ephesians 5.8-14; **John 9.1-41**

Over the last few months we have been treated to a number of memorable passages from the Gospel according to John. At Christmas we heard the prologue to John's Gospel beginning with striking words, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In the beginning... ". During Epiphany we heard the passage about Jesus changing water into wine at the Wedding at Cana, followed by Nicodemus visiting Jesus at night in Jerusalem during Lent. Last Sunday we heard the episode of Jesus' meeting with a Samaritan woman at a well at noontide and today we heard about Jesus giving the man born blind sight. A funny thing for those acquainted with how the Sunday readings are ordered over a three-year cycle – the funny thing is that we have heard a lot of John in a year devoted to reading the Gospel according to Matthew. It is worth going over the ground we just traversed

1. Prologue
2. Wedding at Cana
3. Nicodemus visits Jesus by night
4. Jesus converses with a Samaritan woman at the well
5. The healing of the Man Born Blind

Or as one commentator puts it 'The Healing of the Man Born Blind and Jesus as Door and Shepherd', because as she points out Jesus keeps on talking beyond verse 41. What follows in chapter 10 is Jesus' discourse on the Sign and the conclusion (10.1-18).

As we consider the Healing of the Man born blind we are to keep in mind that Jesus says of himself that he is both the gate and the good shepherd. The purpose of the healing according to Jesus is 'so that God's works might be manifested' in the man who is born blind. Jesus the good shepherd has power 'to lay down his life, and he has power to take it up again.' The episode concludes in chapter 10 with the Evangelist noting,

“Again the Jews were divided because of Jesus’ words. Many of them were saying, ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”

Indeed can a human being turn water into wine? Can a human being be born again? Can a human being tell us everything we ever did? Can a human being lay down their life and take it up again? Can the eternal Word become flesh and dwell among us?

The healing of the man born blind begins with the disciples asking Jesus a question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Not an unreasonable question then or now, because the sins we commit invariably have a knock-on effect that affects others. The sins we commit not only diminish us, they also diminish others on a personal level. Furthermore sin has a collective dimension or if you prefer a social dimension when for example an uneven distribution of wealth causes essential services in a modern societies such as health to be underfunded. The second of the Ten Commandments tells us that our sins, in this case our idolatry, not only affect the perpetrator or perpetrators (yes plural), but also those affected in turn by their actions. We know that those who suffer abuse are often marked by that abuse for the rest of their lives. In the Second Commandment we read, “...for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me...”

This will seem harsh to many, but we should keep in mind how the Commandment is balanced. It is balanced by a statement of God’s great goodness that outshines what has gone before without diminishing it. Sin is sin. The Commandment ends “For I the Lord your God ... show steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Three or four generations are contrasted with 1000 generations. Allow that sink in for a moment. The God who posits 1000 generations against three or four is the God we come to know more nearly, more clearly and more dearly in Jesus Christ. God’s love is steadfast, while sin remains what

it is. Sin diminishes us and far worse it diminishes others. Some words from Ecclesiasticus (21.2)

Flee from sin as from a snake;
for if you approach sin, it will bite you.
Its teeth are lion's teeth,
and can destroy human lives.

The harsh reality of sin is one which too many downplay, excuse, pretend doesn't have a hold on them, even daring to mock and belittle it, as if it were nothing. Sin is destructive. What do Adam and Eve answer God in the cool of the day who has missed them? Adam said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.'

Who has sinned? is the question the disciples ask of Jesus regarding the man born blind – he or his parents? In this case neither. This man is born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him. Again this seems harsh... There is no getting around it. Long story short the man is healed because of Jesus' actions and his words, as well the man's readiness to follow Jesus' instruction to go to the pool of Siloam to wash, which contrasts with the Naaman the Syrian commander, who when asked by Elisha to wash in the Jordan river seven times first gets angry and only when given sound advice relents and does as the prophet directed to be healed of his leprosy. The transformation of the man born blind is immediately noticeable, but it brings division. The division that Jesus brings through his healing action continues right to the end of the episode as noted above. Some will say the man who was born blind is who he says he is, while others protest and say it is someone else. The man who can now see must assert himself and say, 'I am the man'.

Further division is caused by Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Which infuriates the Law keepers. Those who will allow the Law to get in the way of divine mercy, of divine compassion and of divine steadfast love. The man healed by Jesus does not waver in

his witness to Jesus. At one stage we have people saying of Jesus, “‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided.”

Then the parents are called on to testify that the man is who he says he is. Twice the parents will stress that he is of age indicating that the man is at least 13 years old. And with the bravura of youth he tells it as it is. Jesus healed him. He is a bit of a whipper snapper when he says to those questioning him, “Do you want to become his disciples?” Remember it was the disciples who got this episode going with their question about who had sinned. What is perhaps astonishing is that the young man born blind is from now on identified as one of Jesus’ followers, as he witnesses to Jesus and nudges the twists and turns of this dialogue along through his persistence, his questions and his statements simply because he witnesses faithfully to the transformation that has taken place in him. It is a healing. It is a transformative healing. He could not see, but now he can see clearly. He will not back down from what he knows to be true. His witness causes offence. He is a theologian when he says, “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

Note that although once blind he has been listening carefully for he can say that God listens to those who listen to God, worship God and obey God.

And then wham! The blind man’s faithful witness to his transformation brings about a telling reversal in the dialogue, a 90 degrees turn. The conclusion of those who don’t believe the man who challenges them in no uncertain terms is in opposition to Jesus’ earlier statement. Remember Jesus said of the man born blind that he was born blind so the works of God might be revealed in him.’ Neither he nor his parents have sinned. Those who oppose the man born blind and Jesus who is the light of the world say,

“You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.”

But this episode does not end here. Jesus on hearing that the man has been driven out, let’s assume from the Temple precinct, sets out and finds the man who has already been identified as his disciple. Only now does Jesus ask him if he believes that he is the Son of Man. The answer comes. ‘I believe’ and the Evangelist adds that he worshipped Jesus. Remember the Commandment cited earlier, the Second Commandment? It is the Commandment that forbids idolatry in no uncertain terms. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. But here the Evangelist states boldly that this man who has come of age, who can speak for himself who witnesses to his transformation confesses Jesus as the Son of Man and worships him. To confess with your lips is one thing, but to worship Jesus with your body is something more that is why word and action in our liturgies always belong together as they encompass the whole self. The actions are biblically grounded. I am reminded of a passage of the giving of rings in the marriage service,

With my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you,
and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Finally after the confession of faith with word and movement Jesus declares that he has come for judgement that the blind may see and the sighted become blind! Prompting those who have overheard to ask, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

This final question asked by the Pharisees, who are knowledgeable, who are practising Jews, who observe the Sabbath, which after all is one of the Commandments and one that can still be of great benefit. The Pharisees observance has blinded them to the living water springing up to eternal life. It has made them immune to seeing who Jesus is. It takes a man born blind to see who Jesus is. He is Lord of the Sabbath. He stands

in the tradition of the prophets. He is the light of the world. He is to be worshipped. He is to be believed in.

The man born blind tellingly does not have a name. He could be anyone. And in that sense he is "Jedermann". He is everyone. He is you and me. We are born blind and are in need of being born again. We too need to wash in the pool of Siloam that we may see, that our eyes may be opened to the atoning love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ. He is the door to the sheepfold through which we must go. And he is the one who lays down his life for the sheep that he may take up it up again. The greatest sign of his love for the world will be his passion, his death and his resurrection after his entrance into the course of history in his birth at Bethlehem. But this sign needs to be accompanied by the gift of sight coupled with a readiness to say I believe and with a willingness to worship Him who is the Creator, sustainer, sanctifier, redeemer, teacher, prophet, shepherd and friend Jesus Christ.

End.