

Preaching, Sunday March 22nd, 2020. Lent 4A
On seeing and not seeing
Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Have you ever played the game, “would you rather?”

My youngest son Kailan insists on playing it with me, even when I moan every time he suggests it.

It is a game where you have to choose between two options.

Like – would you rather eat a snail or eat a spider.

That sort of thing.

My usual answer is “neither”, but Kailan usually groans out the “daa-aad”, and I have to choose.

So, I have often thought along the lines of – would you rather be deaf or blind.

You may have done an activity like that somewhere in the course of your life, as a means of seeing how you go about thinking things through.

It is difficult to come down on one side over the other.

So, my preferred answer would be, neither.

But what if the question was – would you rather stay blind or gain your sight.

How, if you are blind from birth, can you possibly give a thought through response to that?

Because you have no experience at all of one of the choices.

There was a film some years ago called, “At first sight”. It is based on a story of a boy who loses his sight at the age of ten through a combination of diseases. The boy was able to tell light from dark only.

He had sight early on, but by the time he had his sight recovered, he had lost most of his visual memory, so he was overwhelmed when he regained some of his sight.

That was the thing the film makes a big issue out of.

To help you get into some of the emotion that may have been present in this story that we don't see, you can click on the following link to reach a Youtube clip of people gaining their sight. You will need to hold the CTRL button while you click and it should open up Youtube for you and go straight to the clip.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2r0mFB5Uyfc&t=100s>

(If that doesn't work, highlight this text - 7 Heartwarming Moments of People Seeing for the First Time - copy it, paste it in your Google search engine, and it should bring up 3 Youtube clips in the results. It should be the first of these.)

Interestingly this aspect is not an issue at all in the gospel passage.

Are we then to suppose that Jesus also somehow made him able to automatically recognize everything he saw, or are we to suppose that this didn't happen, but the gospel writer had no interest in conveying this.

Or are we to suppose that something else is going on here.

I think that one.

This is a long and large story.

It is full of many things, and tooing and froing in the narrative.

And of course, fairly drips with John's famous irony.

So, yes something else is going on here.

The first thing very important to note, is this, here it is again, bit of context we need to know.

At the time this gospel was written, John's community was a bit of a mixed bag but still largely Jewish in makeup.

The members still considered themselves Jews, but also followers of Jesus, and part of the Jesus movement.

However, the "other" Jews, based at the synagogue, considered these followers of Jesus not Jews at all, and therefore these Jesus followers were forced out of the synagogue communities.

Their claims about Jesus had gone too far. They had in effect set aside the biblical Law or, better, redefined its role as now to function only as a witness to the Messiah. They now attributed to him claims once made of the Law: that he was the (in fact the only, the true) light, life, truth, word and bread.

It is not difficult to see the passage mirroring the experiences of John's community. Here were Jews in conflict with Jews. This conflict is played out in numerous passages in John. And, like many passages in John the images, loosed from their Jewish moorings, can sail off to join the armada of anti-Semitism. The Pharisees, like Nicodemus in John 3, are stereotypes. Once we see this, other doors open and we recognise conflicts of our own day - also within Christianity. (Rev Prof Bill Loader)

What else is going on here?

Well, I guess we also have a teaching opportunity, and a cautionary tale.

Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

It is a refreshing reminder to hear again Jesus' rejection of a necessary causal link between disability and sin. While it is clearly outrageous to think otherwise, it often appears to inform attitudes and has been given broad application. So, we will hear things like this: that people for whom life does not go well are at fault, whether that is about a disability, unemployment or sickness. Its corollary usually holds such an attitude in place: people who prosper are blessed; people blessed are good people. Other people are bad people! Biblical texts can be cited to support the claim.

Pastor Margaret Court is making exactly such claims in regard to the Corona Virus. Such claims are not only faulty, but dangerous.

In the drama which John unfolds here for his congregations the rhyme and reason for the disability was a matter of promoting the importance of Jesus. Whether the historical Jesus would have seen the needy as opportunities for promotion is doubtful. We need not have an explanation of others' ills in terms of God's benefit. God more likely weeps at others' ills than sees an opportunity for enhancing reputation. But then as now people found many ways of detracting from the dignity of others.

Coming through the narrative is the strength of its source which doubtless portrayed the deed as an act of Christ's compassion. John's story lifts our eyes to a wider

perspective. Jesus is not just a healer, but light for the world's darkness, which was another language for saying: God so loved the world! (Loader)

The author of Ephesians wants to say the same kind of thing - The light is so connected to Christ that it cannot help but be about compassion and care and concern for human beings. Ultimately it is about the light and life of God which generously confronts us with the possibilities of love and goodness and confronts and exposes our seduction to greed and abuse. It means living with the courage to say no to abuse and exploitation and to say yes to love. Such light and life is the gift held out to us in grace. (Loader)

Ok, what else is there in this story for us to see? Here is a very interesting thing here for all of us to take note of.

The conflict I referred to earlier is largely present in the questions asked in this story. Questions like:

Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?

Then how were your eyes opened?

Where is he [Jesus]?

How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?

What do you say about him?

Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?

What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?

There is a sense of mounting tension as the questioners get more and more frustrated each time the man answers them. He is telling them things they do not want to hear, because his story does not fit in to their system of beliefs and experiences.

The man can only answer from his experience - "One thing I do know," he says, "that though I was blind, now I see."

The pharisees pressed harder, then the man asks his own question - "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?" The Pharisees, you can feel them, go crazy with exasperation, tearing their hair out, abusing him and finally sending him away saying (Yelling) - "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?"

The Pharisees questions close in on us as we read the story. They do not open doors to conversation, they are high fences designed to make clear who is on which side of the fence, and to protect their precious beliefs and knowledge.

They are also arrogant and aggravating. We know people like that. Because of this it would be so simple to dismiss them as the bad guys in the story.

When we read the text in a kind of reflective way, we might be open to asking where we find those questioners inside ourselves. And when we recognise when we are like them, the kinds of things that do that to us, then we can begin to feel a measure of compassion for them. Because we know those times when we have retreated behind our fences and thrown stones at those who are different from us, believe different from us, think different from us. And we do this to give us an illusion that our world is secure.

Much like this Corona virus. People are trying to live a normal life. People are flocking to Bondi beach in crowds to swim, against all advice. There is a sense of hiding behind an illusion that “this won’t happen to me”.

Lent then offers us an opportunity.

To ask the questions of ourself or others, that expand our vision rather than confining it. Good questions rinse our eyes clean so we can see. They widen and deepen our vision. They clarify our perception of what is present in our lives and of what is possible. They remind us that we may not always get answers, but asking a good question makes way for a response.

John closes this story with questions that are good eye-clearing questions. Jesus, John tells us, finds the seeing man and asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answers Jesus’ question with a question: “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.” His question leads, not to a wall, or to a law, but to worship.

It’s the Pharisees who offer the final line in the long litany of questions that this story contains. Overhearing the exchange between the sighted man and Jesus, they ask, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”

Are we?

How well is your spirit seeing these days? What questions are coming your way in this season? What questions are you offering? (No doubt a lot...ask them!)

Are they doorways or walls? How do they take you deeper into the mystery of Christ? Are there deeper questions beneath your questions? What questions will help keep your eyes clear so that you can see, and be sent?

And there finally is the last thing in this passage to notice.

John wants to make sure that we know that Siloam, the name of the pool in which the man washed his eyes, means **Sent**.

We are all being sent. Even in isolation.

Sometimes we are sent beyond the boundaries of what others find acceptable or comfortable or convenient. Sometimes we are sent beyond the limits of our own vision. Whether or not we know where we are going—and sometimes **especially** when we think we know where God means for us to go—we are ever needful of learning how to see. Like Jesus with the blind man, God calls us to participate in claiming the vision that God gives us, so that, as Jesus says, God’s works might be revealed in us. In order to know where and how and by whom we are being sent, we need to keep visiting Siloam to do the washing that will keep our eyes clear.

This is your day, your life.

Night will come, when you are no more.

But today you are God’s light in the world.

*This is the time to shine, to be seen,
to love, to forgive and ask forgiveness,
to speak for justice, to give yourself
to the mending of the world.*

This day. Amen. (Jan Richardson)