

# St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

## Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2017 - Lent 4

READING John 9: 1-41 *A Man Born Blind Receives Sight*

How can it be that a wonderful miracle of receiving sight stirs up so much blindness?

This is a fascinating story in the gospel of John. It is one of the seven signs in the gospel, things we might call miracles that point us deeper towards our understanding of Jesus.

Before we look and seek to expose the blindness that abounds in the story, it is worth thinking about the community that gives us the gospel of John. This is a faith community that is now third or fourth generation since Jesus was around. Like all the gospels, this was written after Jesus life, death and resurrection. While Jesus is more than a distant memory, the faith community relies on the stories they remember, and those moments of sensing the light is present, or the Spirit is moving amongst them.

This story is a reminder that it isn't easy to defend your faith when Jesus has gone. It isn't easy to answer hard questions like all those who doubt and struggle to see when we feel a little orphaned, or lost without the one who comes to us as light.

In this story, all the challenges given the man born blind – those by neighbour, parents and Pharisee alike – are the kinds of challenges that John's community faces it comes to faith and seeing who Jesus is. And those issues are just as real for us too. How do we explain the presence of Jesus with us now, for example? How can we put words to the mystery of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the fuel and fire for John's community and our own today? How do we respond to the challenges of all who struggle to see and who call us to account for that which is hard to explain?

Perhaps there are many who have our ear with the attitude of the neighbours. They see a man they do not know because they cannot believe he is the one who has been neighbour to them all his life. It can't be him because our neighbour is blind, but this bloke isn't. Who can believe in miracles when they simply don't have the eyes or faith to see them? Who can

believe in miracles these days when science and rationality rob our culture of mystery and hope?

It's not just the neighbours though. The man who was born blind has parents who you think might stand up for him. But they are too afraid to speak up lest they suffer his ultimate fate – to be expelled from the faith community. Instead they show their own form of blindness, or rather cowardice. Don't bother us, ask him.

How often do we struggle to answer those who question our faith? How easy it is to sidestep our own experiences of the light. Won't people mock us if we say we believe in miracles, or signs, or divine mystery? How will the light shine if we won't hold up the light of Christ and instead choose to inhabit the shadows?

The parents are perhaps like any of us, and not all that unusual in response. But beyond that the darkness deepens. The Pharisees are in on the story and they cannot possibly see what Jesus has done here. They cannot see because their religious framework gets in the way. First of all, it is a Sabbath day. Healing is forbidden on the Sabbath because it amounts to work.

And so the darkness seems to swirl around endlessly where we might have expected there to be a celebration of light. A person who was once blind can now see, for God's sake. Surely that's worth marvelling in, and delighting in, rather than worrying about the law?

But it isn't just the healing part that violated the sanctity of the Sabbath. It was also forbidden to make mud on the Sabbath. What kind of blindness gets fixated on spittle and dust and calls it sin?

So the Pharisees have a problem. Jesus has obviously sinned by working on the Sabbath. And yet a sinner cannot perform a sign like this. So the unresolvable dilemma blinds them to the very light they seek to protect: Perhaps Jesus didn't heal this man? Maybe this man is only mistaken for the one we know is still blind? Maybe they are all sinners?

Ironically they admit their own blindness because there is no way out. When the Pharisees keep badgering the man and he asks if they want to be disciples of Jesus, they are caustic in their reply. As they revile him they say, 'You were born entirely in sins!' The Pharisees have just admitted the truth that this man was blind, but now can see.

With no place left to go, they expel him from the faith community. Their blindness deepens because they cannot possibly believe that Jesus can be the source of light.

Do we, as a church, still hold on to things that hold us back from the fullest revelation of the light? Do we have ways of seeing or frameworks to think within that restricts our acceptance of what God does and where the Spirit blows? The church has a long history of being blind to things, it is not just the privilege of the Pharisees. Once we supported slavery. We have been blind to situations that have left children vulnerable. We have been blind to human impact on God's good creation.

What do we need eyes for in our local community today? What is it that we cannot see but that the light of the world desires us to see?

The Church Council was alerted this week to the issue of homelessness and the crisis of accommodation for those on the edges. Next time we meet we will hear from someone who is inviting us to be share the love and light of Jesus Christ with vulnerable folk who otherwise live in dark corners and hide themselves away from our vision.

The man has been expelled from the community by the Pharisees. Jesus has been absent from the story up to this point. That is perhaps a struggle we face – to wonder how the spirit becomes present and moves us in ways we hardly expect; and open our eyes to things we never knew were there to see. But Jesus does not remain absent. At the moment the man once blind is at his most vulnerable, Jesus seeks him out.

I wonder if that is light and truth for you? I wonder if that is perhaps why you are here today – because at some low in your life, Jesus sought you and found you and offered you light?

That's what happens when the man has been expelled by the Pharisees. Jesus re-engages in conversation and invites him deeper in his seeing.

So far there has been a physical healing of his sight. But the journey calls him far deeper. As he is questioned by neighbour, Pharisee and others, it helps him to see more clearly that Jesus is the light of the world. The move is subtle. First he calls Jesus a man. Then he calls him a prophet. Then he says that he comes from God. And now in this final chapter we come to a full revelation of the light.

‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’, Jesus asks him. And as Jesus reveals the light to him, the man who was once blind drops to his knees and proclaims, ‘Lord, I believe.’

In a story that swirls in darkness and confusion, here at last the light shines. And it shines in contrast to the Pharisees, as Jesus links their blindness to sin.

Like all actors in this incredible story, we are confronted with things that challenge or rock our faith. We struggle when bad things happen to us, and wonder about the justice and judgement of God. Here Jesus is clear – justice and judgement is not meted out in the bad things that happen in life, but rather through life choices. Judgement comes upon the Pharisees in this story as they choosing dark over the light.

We are challenged in more subtle ways than that as well. We are prone to disbelief like the neighbours – because surely such miraculous events challenge our capacity to see. We are vulnerable like the parents who sidestep the limelight and prefer shadows, lest we be held to account for our faith. We are even challenged like the Pharisees because our own brand of religion can have bias and prejudice that is not of God or the light revealed through Jesus Christ.

But the questions and the challenges are also opportunity to deepen faith, to grow towards the light, to see that sight is far more than the work of our eyes. And this is the path of the man who finds that through the interrogations the light slowly brightens.

‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’

*Ephesians 5: 8-14*

*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,*

*‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’*