

Sermon Archive 142

Sunday 26 March, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 9: 1-41

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



They look at me, and see a sinner.

They look at me, and see punishment from above.

They look at me, and see a mistake.

They look at me, and see someone to frighten.

They look at me, and see someone whose role in the world is to sit by the side of the road and beg.

They look at me, and see someone whose experience is to be ignored or disbelieved – “what would he know? He’s a sinner.”

He looks at me, and sees the son of parents.

He looks at me, and sees God’s blessing.

He looks at me, and talks about light, and God’s glory shining as compassion touches the world.

He looks at me, and sees **me**.

He says to me

there **is** blindness here,

but it’s not yours.

You go, and wash in the pool of Siloam.

Let your eyes be opened

and see the healing presence of God.

-ooOoo-

It’s a story about spiritual blindness. Let’s break it into seven sections and see what we can see.

Spiritual blindness – Section One. The story begins with a group of disciples (open spirited, inquisitive people of good will) walking past someone with a disability. There’s a hurdle in this man’s life, a challenge to be faced. I wonder what kind of response they could make – that might speak of spiritual vision, spiritual light. I guess they could throw him a few coins. That’s what others have been in the habit of doing. I guess some of the coins might have been thrown with a bit of empathy. Maybe some have been thrown as guilt offerings, or as a public flourish of charity for others to “see” and admire. Maybe some has been thrown so he’ll go home – people begging on the streets isn’t what we

want others to see in our neighbourhood. It makes us look like we've got no social concern – or that our culture is churning out dregs. So throw him a few coins, won't you.

The story does not record the disciples giving the man any coins. It records them making another kind of contribution. The disciples contribute a theory about sin and punishment. Their God doesn't make mistakes. And blindness, a terrible condition, clearly isn't something that God would accidentally let slip. The only possible way they can accept blindness, in a world of a creating, evaluating, responding God, is that it's a deliberate punishment from God for someone's sin.

They don't know yet whether the sin belonged to him, or whether it belonged to his parents. They don't know whether he's collateral damage, or whether the curse landed right on target; but whatever the case, the explanation for the situation is punishment for sin.

Spiritual blindness – to look upon a human situation and feel no compassion. To look upon debilitation, disadvantage, challenge, and feel that the main goal here is to defend the rationality of religion. To come across a suffering person and only say "it's your own damned fault". Spiritual blindness – to offer judgment as a response to human suffering. That's the end of the first section of the story.

Spiritual blindness – Section Two. The situation comes to the attention of the neighbours - the people among whom he has lived, the people who've been keeping him supplied with tossed tokens of charity. The situation confuses them, because people in their world don't just suddenly develop the capacity to see. The things that create poverty and disadvantage don't just suddenly go away. So, trying to work it out, the neighbours do a wonderfully entertaining thing: they produce a conspiracy theory! A set of alternative facts. This man going around the world seeing things, is in fact an impostor. The real blind man is hidden out back somewhere – sucking us into thinking that something amazing has happened. Of course the impostor is going to say "No, I **am** the man", but he's not. He's part of a trick that is being played on us! The community divides against itself over whether the conspiracy is true. Isn't it interesting – the only reason that this argument finds any place within this community is that enough of the people aren't actually sure who the man is. They've walked past him many times. They throw him coins quite often – but they don't know his face well enough to say either "yes" or "no" to whether this is him or someone else. Maybe they've not been throwing coins to him – maybe only **at** him - in his direction. They don't know one neighbour from another. It's in this kind of "not-recognising your neighbour" that the ridiculous conspiracy theories manage to flourish – and divide communities down the middle.

Spiritual blindness – to look upon something that is good, (a healing, an act of liberation), and to respond with conspiracy theories that set communities at cross

purposes. To come upon someone saying “No, I **am** the man – something good has happened”, and to respond by saying “you don’t know who you are – stop lying. Your news is fake.” Here ends the second section.

Spiritual blindness – Section Three. The situation now comes to the attention of the Pharisees – experts in law. And they do what comes naturally to experts in law. They identify the breaking of a law. It had been a Sabbath when Jesus had restored the blind man’s sight. That restoration, technically, was “work”, and working on the Sabbath is a crime. The healer is a criminal – no better morally than those others we regularly crucify outside the city walls. (A wee Lenten piercing in the background.) As the narrative pace feels like it’s pumping up, they tell the healed man, that whatever he’s received from the healer, it’s **not from God**, because God doesn’t work through criminals. So don’t rejoice too much in that blessing that’s occurred – because it’s not a miracle. God has not touched your life. It may be, even, that something devious has come near. Have no confidence in, no natural outpouring of gratitude for, this thing that’s made you happy. Suspect it. Hate it. Turn away from it. It’s not the good thing that it seems.

Spiritual blindness – to elevate the significance of keeping a religious law over the significance of experiencing liberation. To call “bad” something that is good. To rob someone of their sense of wonder and joy. Here ends Section Three.

Spiritual blindness – Section Four. At this stage, those close to the healed man are drawn into the witch hunt. The Pharisees go after the testimony of his elderly parents. We know that they’re elderly, because part of their testimony is that their son is of age. We also know that they’re frightened – because the narrator tells us so. They’re being hauled into an interrogation by people who have the power to put them out of the synagogue – if they don’t answer in ways that are pleasing. In fact they answer exactly as frightened people do – defensively, deflectingly, non-committing-ly. These are people who neither did the healing, nor were themselves healed. But they are tied by love to one of the central characters – and also are perhaps vulnerable to the powers of the Pharisees. It’s interesting that in this section of the story, the power of the Pharisees to exclude, to isolate from community, is just quietly mentioned - almost as an aside (a wee Lenten piercing in the background). Quite an effective way of making people scared.

Spiritual blindness – methods of intimidation, picking on people’s vulnerabilities and fears. Having a go at the family. Here ends Section Four.

Spiritual blindness – Section Five. Having got nothing of much value from the old people, the Pharisees go back to the man born blind. They put the same questions as before, this time less patiently. Is it a technique among the spiritually blind to grind

people down – to wither people away – to not change the question, but to insist on a changed answer? It really has the feel of intransigent people attempting to wear someone down. And under the withering and wearing down, the man born blind doesn't know where to go with this. With more than a hint of exasperation, he says it like this: "one thing I do know, that although I was born blind, now I see." He does not purport to understand what has happened. He doesn't purport to being an expert in Jesus. He just says "this is what happened to me. This is my experience." And the Pharisees say right back at him, "well, yours is the experience of a sinner – and we're not listening to you. They then drive him out. In section Five the man who "sees" is driven out.

Refusing to acknowledge the experience of the other person. Responding to what I have learned while walking in these shoes, with a complete dismissal of my experience. How much of the world's conflict comes from a failure even to listen to the voices from other perspectives?

Section Six. These people have the temerity to say to Jesus "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

Section Seven. Thankfully, as the seeing man is driven out, he happens to come across Jesus. Following his hurtling, jarring ride through the mechanisms of spiritual blindness, he is received by Jesus.

They look at me, Jesus, and see a sinner.

They look at me, and see punishment from above.

They look at me, and see someone to frighten.

They look at me, and see a mistake.

They look at me, and see someone whose experience is to be ignored or disbelieved – "what would he know? He's a sinner."

You look at me, and see the son of parents.

You look at me, and see God's blessing.

You look at me, and talk about light, and God's glory shining as compassion touches the world.

You look at me, and see me.

You say to me

there *is* blindness here,

but it's not yours.

So go, wash in the pool of Siloam;

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and see with the vision of God.

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