



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, March 22, 2020

Gospel Passage Reference: John 9:1-41

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel this morning is often headed of “The Healing of the Man Born Blind.” Now we’re used to this story – like the story of the Samaritan woman at the well that we read together in last week’s Gospel, it’s familiar – maybe too familiar. You know how you think you know about something or someone and then they reveal a side or a layer that surprises you? Well, this story is like that.

On the face of it, it’s just the story of the healing of the man born blind.

But did you ever wonder why we call him that? One of my favourite biblical scholars pointed that quirk out and it made me stop and ponder a bit.

I mean, why do we call this man “the man born blind?” Actually he’s also described in a few other ways too: “the man who used to sit and beg” and “the man who had formerly been blind.” It’s so interesting that instead of foregrounding the transformation that Jesus gifted to him, that we and all those who encountered him, tether him to his blindness.

Okay, so a few things we probably need to name out loud – they’re deeply cultural, but extremely important to understand – because then we’ll get the scope of the miracle that’s occurred for this man. Scholars tell us that in biblical times,

Physical symptoms [like blindness] were primarily seen as a sign of some disruption of proper relationships - that is, of sin: since that is precisely what "sin" is - a breach of, . . . relationship: with God, with family; with neighbour; etc.¹

So, when the disciples ask their question: “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?” they’re working within this worldview.

¹ Ewart, D. (2011, February) <https://www.holytextures.com/2011/02/john-9-1-41-year-a-lent-4-sermon.html>

But yet again, Jesus forces them to see differently, with kingdom eyes and corrects them in their blindness – when he declares that that is a false equation that he completely and utterly rejects. He says, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do.”

The other thing we need to keep in mind is this: if sin is defined as the disruption of relationships with God and with neighbour, then the real miracle here that Jesus pulls off, is not just giving this man his sight, but restoring his life – his future – and his hope.

When Jesus shows up, everything changes.

But so interesting, that ever since this story was recorded, we’ve had trouble dealing with that Christ-altered reality and instead we describe that man according to who he used to be, and according to what limited him.²

I counted 12 references to the fact that he WAS blind! And just a few to the fact that he could now see.

I wonder if they did that in order to suture him to a reality that they could cope with? Or was it a way to control him? Or Jesus?

But the fact is neither of those two things were possible. The man who received his sight was reborn twice really because he goes from hearing Jesus before his healing to gradually seeing him fully – and seeing Jesus physically was the easiest part of that transformation. He was reborn physically and spiritually.

Remember I said a few moments ago that the real miracle was the restoration of this man to his future, to hope? Well, you can see this reality unfold in all his interactions – at first he’s just descriptive of the miracle – ‘he put mud on my eyes and told me to go wash. When I washed, I saw.’ He repeats this not once but three times: once to his neighbours, and then twice to the Pharisees. But he grows in the strength of his testimony each time until he finally loses his patience with the questioning and says “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about [this man], but the fact is, he opened my eyes! That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

He goes from someone who merely describes his reality to making a statement of faith about who Jesus is and where he comes from.

² Lose, D. (2017, March 23) . *The Man Who Now Sees*. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-4-a-the-man-who-now-sees/>

We see his gradual understanding, his gradual sight developing until it culminates in the very next part of the story:

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

Jesus is pointing out both Spiritual sight and literal sight – in a very sweet way – and then the culmination of the story is here: Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshipped him.

This is the only time in St. John’s Gospel that anyone is described as worshipping Jesus. So that seems important.

The man who was born blind is given full healing and full sight in this moment: he receives spiritual as well as physical sight. But Jesus does point to spiritual blindness as the real sin right after. In this story, the Pharisees’ inability to recognize how God’s healing hand is active in this miracle is the real blindness – along with their inability to let God be God.

So this story ends with a reversal. The first part of that reversal is that the Pharisees – or the religious ones – the ones arguably who should be able to recognize God for God – are as it turns out the ones who can’t. Their wilful blindness - their insistence that they know it all reveals the real blindness in the story. In reality, the ones who sin are those who do not recognize Jesus for the Messiah at work in the world to save it.

And the man who received his sight? Well, he is just that. Not the man who was born blind. He’s called out of his past, to face his future – a future for which he had had no expectation before Jesus showed up – so he’s called to face that future with hope – with a new identity as the man who sees.

As one scholar says: the good news is that [in this gospel] Jesus is calling us forward. The past matters, but it is past. Jesus’ cross reminds us that the hurts, sorrows, mistakes, and regrets that have marked us may describe us, but they do not define us, for we are God’s beloved children. And Jesus’ resurrection assures us that God’s love is more powerful than our tragedies and that the future is always open.³

When Jesus shows up, everything changes.

³ Lose, D.

So, what is this Gospel saying to us today?

Perhaps the challenge to us from the Gospel personally is this: how often do we define ourselves according to the past? Now that we have the time to consider these things in relative quiet, perhaps it's time to take time to pray about the things that we are being called to let go of – the labels that keep us from facing forward and claiming our hope as beloved and healed children of God?

What life are we being called into that requires us to walk, full-sighted and trusting where God is leading us?

You know, we don't know if the "blind man from birth" asked to be "the man who received his sight." But undoubtedly – and we know because he says so – his life was immeasurably better because of that gift. I can only imagine how it reconstructed absolutely everything – and how that must have been as difficult as it was wonderful. Transformative change works that way.

Well, we're in the midst of a time that we have not chosen. And yet it is here. So I have a suggestion: again, as we all have time to be still now – and frankly, we can't run away from ourselves, maybe an important thing to come from this particular Gospel reading in this particular time – is that we intentionally call to mind the fact that because of Jesus – we are not bound to the past – because Jesus has shown up in our lives, the future lies open before us to be different, to do differently. Because we don't want to be defined by what has limited us but by how we meet the possibility that lies before us.

Perhaps on a corporate level, the challenge to us in the Gospel today is to face forward and imagine a church that is different – different during and after this present crisis.

Right now, it occurs to me there are things to recapture: and one of those is that it is important to practice faith at home until such time as we can gather again. To remember that Jesus himself learned psalms and prayers at his mother's knee; that Sabbath and daily prayer and gratitude for sustenance were part of the rhythm of everyday life. And this present moment is an opportunity to recapture that deep and sustaining rhythm of faith. This is the moment to be the church in our homes. Start by joining me tonight as we light a candle of hope and unity and pray with our families with our Metropolitan – Archbishop Anne at 7 o'clock.

You see, in the present situation, the small things become large – our world has shrunk and the need to practice our faith with those immediately beside us has grown.

Now is the time to rededicate ourselves to loving our neighbour, our families as ourselves.

Now is the time to engage with each other online or by phone – through shared services and pastoral care by warm and loving voice. We must not go it alone. And we must give. One of our blind spots both before and during this time is how we have thought of stewardship. And now it has become an inescapable issue for us. We know that it's far more than the church budget – it's the spiritual practice of recognizing that all that we are and all that we have is a gift from God. And what a gift - the miracles we get to be part of through our giving include providing daily bread.

And so even though we are not gathering, we have a need to keep to our financial promises – this is crucial – because many vulnerable people depend on the offering of the church.

But most of all, most importantly, now is not the time to fall away. Practice the habit of faith – it will strengthen you and the church of Jesus Christ of which we are a part as we go forward. The church must be the Church in these times – albeit differently.

When God shows up, everything changes. I find that reassuring – and a little discomfiting. On this fourth Sunday in our Lenten journey, a journey on which we are trying to reorient ourselves to God's will for our lives, these things sit sometimes uncomfortably side by side in all our hearts. And so we pray today and always that we may fully see and trust the One who beckons us on into transformative change and follow, claiming our hope and our new life.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.