

Learning to see

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 March, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Lent 3A

John 9:1-41

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

This gospel story is meant to be seen as funny, especially considering the bumbling and clumsy ways and thinking of all the characters, except for the man born blind and Jesus. The reader and listener are meant to laugh at the irony between the joy of the gaining of sight, and the negative response of those whose lives it has upset, namely the parents and the religious elite.

Good news is not always seen as that, especially when people do not feel part of that good news. Feeling apart from the “moment”, or at a loss to understand or explain it, and not knowing what else to do, people turn to doing what they know: they instead reject, disregard, or dismiss.

One looks with interest at the response by different sections of the community, local and overseas, of the current and developing catastrophe that the COVID-19 virus has brought. The response is anything from denial, to secrecy, to the out and out panic, and the subsequent attitude of sheer selfishness as expressed with the hoarding of toilet paper and hand sanitisers.

Calm resolve to do what is within reach and possible is the sensible option, and what most are doing. The simple act of washing hands and coughing into a handkerchief or elbow, the act of acknowledging by a nod instead of shaking hands, the regular use of hand sanitisers ... if you can get any! Governments and organisations have taken the responsibility for the movement of people by taking radical action of air travel and cancelling fixtures with large gatherings of people.

The call for both institution and individual is to care for community by taking responsibility and encouraging self-care and health.

COVID-19 virus has been a major wake-up call for the whole world. The medical experts are saying that it cannot be curtailed, and at best, can only be slowed as the whole of the world community remains vigilant in taking responsibility for its own health and cleanliness. However, amidst the unstoppable wave of a new virus, it is interesting to note that there are some who resort to blaming and pointing an accusative and judgemental finger.

The starting point for the story of the man born blind was ... who is to blame?

When there is a tragedy or an unfortunate condition, the go-to, the easy way of understanding is the cause and effect approach. The rational and scientific approach to explaining anything, seems simplistic, rather than the way of mystery when answers to complex questions seem elusive. Indeed, is there need for answers?

After a particular worship service, an elderly lady said to me these words: *I must learn to learn again*. She confessed, that for a long time, she had allowed herself to believe that she knew enough, had slipped into the attitude that she was too old to learn more, and that learning more was too much of an adjustment.

Her comment came after one of those services that was interactive and had some hands-on activities. It had proven difficult for those who were used to sitting in the pews, with a relatively passive time of an hour of familiar hymns, prayers and a 10-15 minute sermon.

When it comes to worship services, most people like the odd and refreshing surprise, interspersed with the usual and familiar. This lady acknowledged that she had drifted into the predictability and safety of the sameness of church life, including worship. So hence her statement, *"I must learn to learn again."* Not an easy admission.

That is the situation in the gospel passage today. We have Jesus and a blind man whose sight has been restored. What a wonderful story of a positive change. As for the rest of the players, including the man's parents and the religious elite, in this story, they did not share the joy. They had been confronted with something different and liberating, their stable way of life had been shaken, and they were petrified. They could not move. Their existence was stagnant and had taken on the pungency that the lack of movement promotes.

It took for a man who had been born blind to gain sight, to not only disturb this community's existence but also shake its very foundations. They had been used to the slavery of sameness, and now their still and stagnant pond had been stirred. They had to respond to the obvious, but they were too worried that their small world began to wobble. Stillness to even the smallest movement can be painful.

Seeing differently is an effort and a humbling time. But the light bulb moment comes when eyes are opened and we can say "I see!" These sorts of stories abound in the season of Lent, and we are reminded of Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the man born blind. All these stories tell of not just of gaining physical sight, but the sight of new understanding.

Seeing is a choice. Too often we avoid what we would rather not see, refusing to question, closing our eyes to new perspectives, and in the process, avoiding possibilities to new life. When we see wrongly, or worse, when we refuse to see, we hurt others and ourselves, but when we see clearly, we discover life and deep connection with God and others.

It is tragic when religion blinds us to the truth, but this occurred even in Jesus' day. The religious leaders in this story are in circles with their closed logic, that being, Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and that is forbidden work and it is therefore a sin. Little wonder that Jesus accuses the Pharisees of losing sight of the reason for the Sabbath, and so choosing the blindness of following law for the sake of the law itself. How often does the present church choose to stick to the ways of the past because of its familiarity, than to choose a way that is both liberating and relevant to the present? Also, the prophetic vision to change while still in the present offers yet another challenge.

The question of sin is central to this story. A core belief of the time was that sickness was a punishment from God, so the disciples wondered whether it was the blind man or his parents whose sin was to blame for the physical blindness of the man.

Today, we tend to scoff at such questions. However, it is not uncommon to hear blame given to misfortune and declare that someone is at fault. God did not set up parents to have a child born blind or the man to live the life of a beggar. We are all born in the image of God with our own characteristics and idiosyncrasies. With thoughtful consideration, together with the intrinsic belief that we are made in the image of God, we can love ourselves and each other with greater capacity.

This story is a comedy, and we are meant to laugh at the bumbling players. While Jesus almost disappears after the man had gained sight, the only person who comes out with any credibility is the formerly blind man himself. Neither disciple nor parents look good in this story. The Pharisees also try to deceive everyone as they try to maintain their influence and power, and eventually, their judgement and doubt and questions turn on themselves.

Their claim that Jesus has sinned - because he has healed on the Sabbath - has the Pharisees quick to pronounce their own blindness. They have neither seen Jesus nor the blind man clearly. They have chosen instead to operate within their own paradigm of their rules, their control, their power, their stubbornness. The Gospel passage from John confirms that neither Jesus nor the blind man is a sinner. If this passage teaches us anything, it is that we need to be careful not to allow our sin-focus to blind us to what God is doing.

The Gospel seeks to reveal Jesus as the one sent by God, inspiring faith in Jesus more than the miracles revealed. The blind man is the model. He goes from blindness to seeing to belief in Jesus as a prophet, to relationship with Jesus — true sight and true faith. He may begin by seeing, but he ends with understanding.

More-so, the now-seeing man is the one sent to reveal the One who gives sight, not only physical sight but also the sight of new life.

On this Lenten journey with Jesus, we too cry out to be able to see, we confess to be on the same journey as the healed one who was blind but now sees.

Now we too are able to see, and we too are the sent ones to show the light of God for those who still need to see.