

22nd March 2023 Midweek Communion – Spiritual Blindness
John 9:1-7, 13-22, 35-38

How good is your eyesight? Can you see clearly or are things sometimes a bit of a blur? Throughout my life I have had poor sight in my left eye. In fact when I was in primary school it was a common practice for children of my age with what was called a lazy eye to have to wear a patch on one eye for many months to help to correct the problem. Mine never was sorted and so I've been used to wearing glasses every day.

Today's story is a famous one from the scriptures about the healing of a man who was blind from birth. But what is different is that his life is totally transformed by his encounter with Jesus.

Blindness was treated completely differently back then than it is today. In those days, it meant that the man wouldn't have many opportunities to get anywhere in life. His life involved begging on the streets of Jerusalem. To make it worse, most of the people he encountered would have assumed that he had done something wrong to end up blind - He or his parents. Someone must have sinned. He would have been used to hearing whispers or gossip all his life. And even Jesus' disciples openly wonder what this man did wrong, or what his parents did wrong, that caused him to be born blind.

I'm not sure whether our society is any different today when it comes to gossip. I remember a few years ago when things were difficult for me, hearing that parishioners were talking about me in Asda giving their opinion on the circumstances. Or we hear of some situation in a family that we know, and we begin to talk through our own opinions on what has happened. I don't think people can help themselves.

But Jesus doesn't see things like this does he? He tells his disciples that there is more to life than meets the eye. This particular man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. God had a plan and purpose for his life that no one could see until Jesus came along.

And so today's reading is more than just the healing of physical sight. In fact the man's physical healing is only described in a little section of the reading – verse 7.

Helping this man to physically see, in other words, was arguably the easy part. After this man's physical sight is restored, the neighbours argue about whether this man really was born blind or not. They refuse to see that a miracle has occurred. They can't see this miracle because they are unwilling to believe it.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, are less concerned with whether the miracle really happened or not. Their concern is that it happened on the Sabbath. They, too, are unable to see this miracle because they are blinded by their rules and regulations.

And then there are the blind man's parents. They are so afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue for being followers of Jesus that they refuse to say what happened to their son. Their fear has blinded them from seeing and celebrating the miracle they no doubt had been praying for.

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All of this leads us to wonder, is there anyone in this story who is *not* blind in some way? By the end of the story, there will be one, and that is the man born blind. He is a remarkable man. After his physical sight is restored, he is brought before the Pharisees, who badger him with questions. He shares, openly and honestly, what happened. And when they ask him what he thinks about Jesus, he says to them, “He is a prophet.” You see? He is beginning to see, but he’s not there yet. Later, after his own parents have abandoned him, he is brought before the Pharisees again. They demand that he tell them that Jesus is a sinner. His answer? “I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” The Pharisees don’t like his answer, of course. They kick him out of the synagogue, just as they threatened to do to his parents.

And so as Jesus hears that he’s been thrown out of the synagogue, he returns. The reason for this is to help him see in a different way, and now the man is ready to be healed in a completely different way. Jesus asks him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”³⁶ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir?’³⁷ Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’³⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’³⁸ He said, ‘Lord,³⁸ I believe.’ And he worshipped him. He worships the one that has helped him see.

I’m sure it’s no surprise that I’m going to refer to the famous hymn – Amazing Grace at this stage. We all know the story behind the hymn – John Newton is a merchant seaman and eventually becomes the captain of a slave ship. In a bad storm off the coast of Donegal the ship hits rocks and is destroyed, but Newton survives. A spiritual conversion takes place in his heart.

At the age of 31 Newton has a stroke and gives up seafaring. And after recovering from the stroke he begins to study and becomes a Church of England minister. Through years of reflection he recognises how wrong his involvement in slavery was, and how God had given him another chance. He wrote a hymn called “Faith’s Review and Expectation, but which later became known by its opening line “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound”.

Shortly before Newton’s death, he is quoted as saying, “*My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Saviour!*” God’s amazing grace had opened Newton’s eyes, and his life was changed forever.

So what about us? Are we blind in various ways? What areas of our lives do we know God needs to do a healing work in us? Asking these questions takes us into the heart of today’s gospel reading. An encounter with Jesus that helps this man to see who he is, and who Jesus is. A man born blind, a beggar, who is now a fearless evangelist and a model for us all. He now sees who he is, he sees who Jesus is, and he is helping those around him to see with new eyes.

All of us are blind. We are all sinners. But do we recognise it, or are we like the others in this bible story, who continue to see the issues beyond ourselves? We should be reminded today that whilst we once were blind, it is only through Jesus that we can see, and like the blind man we should respond in worship to this in thankfulness.