

Lent 4  
26/3/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Ephesians 5:8-14  
Psalm 23  
John 9:1-16

### The blessed blindness of the people of God

---

The most immediately distracting thing in our gospel story this morning is the healing of the man born blind. The people in the text – Jesus, the disciples, the religious leaders, the blind man and his family – know as well as we do that this doesn't happen; the blind man himself will declare later in the story (what we didn't hear this morning): "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind." They were not more credulous than we are about such things. The religious leaders do not believe the healing has occurred until their own substantial criterion is met: that they have two witnesses – the testimony of his parents that he had been blind from birth; he was blind but now he sees.

There is nothing to get in the way of our hearing this story, then, as the account of a genuine miracle. That we might imagine ourselves to be more "scientific" about such things, or more thorough in our investigations today, does not matter for our hearing of the story because it is not really about what might have happened one fine day in Jerusalem 2000 years ago. It is about what *would* have happened, *had indeed* such a miracle occurred: it is about our response to the presence of something which doesn't fit.

The initial question is, naturally, Did it *happen?*, but then the more pressing question makes itself felt: What are we to *make* of it? For in the story, the miracle is not merely a marvellous thing. The story is really about the *trouble* the miracle creates. This is what a mere *surface* reading of the story will normally miss. We easily, unthinkingly, imagine that a miracle like this would be an unequivocally good thing yet it is not in the story – this is the real "miracle", the really unexpected thing: that Jesus is accused of *godlessness* because he has done this. It is this accusation we really need to wrestle with, and whether or not such things could happen.

The problem of the miracle is that Jesus performs it on a Sabbath, which makes the healing what we might call a "contra-indicator". Again, we are at risk of dismissing the significance of this because the Christianised West has long since "dealt with" – *dismissed* – the Sabbath, precisely because of stories like this. But we have to take seriously that it was tricks like this – his marvellous miracles – which got Jesus killed; this is even more striking following the events we'll hear in next week's reading: the raising of Lazarus. The religious leaders do not fall about, lost in wonder, love and praise when Lazarus is called forth from the tomb; they plot to kill Jesus. While we might sometimes long to feel the miraculous touch which that blind man felt back then, or that Lazarus felt, if we lack any sense of how that touch might be *offensive* to us or others, then we have not understood yet what such a wonder-work would *mean*.

The contra-indication of the miracle is that it is clearly from God – who else could pull this off? – yet it seems to contradict the requirement to do no work on the Sabbath. This requirement was clearly very strictly observed by the Pharisees and others. It does not matter that it might seem trivial to us; it would be more useful to us to try imagine what sacredness in our experience of the world Jesus might contravene, to our great offence

but as an act by which Jesus demonstrates himself entirely free of our fears and anxieties and, in so being, able to bring freedom to others.

[The early church experienced something of the same dynamic when, because of its opinion (“dogma”) about who God was, believers ceased sacrificing at the pagan temples. To us, in our “everyone to his/her own” world, there is no offence here; they were simply expressing their free will. Yet, they were put to death for this: for not “going to temple”, we might say. The stories of such martyrdoms often offend us because we wonder, Why didn’t they just sacrifice and, perhaps, cross their fingers? We don’t often ask, Why was this something which the authorities thought constituted a *death penalty*? In an age and society in which there is very little we can imagine that we would die for, we are poorly equipped to understand what it means for the Pharisees to be confronted with the terrifying freedom of Jesus, or the Romans to be confronted with the fabric of society and order being white-anted by Christian resistance at crucial expectations.]

Could Jesus offend us – *us*, the people of God – in the same way as he did in today’s story?

Perhaps. There are many things we hold dear which God-in-Christ could shake to their foundations. But the problem is, if we take today’s story seriously: how would we *know* that it was indeed “Jesus” – true God of true God in our very midst – who was being so offensive? This is the dispute of the Pharisees among themselves: How could this *not* be of God? while, at the same time, they wonder, how *could* it be *God* who has done this *in this way*?

This is to say: our story today doesn’t give us much of a clue as to where God will appear next or any means by which we might know that, indeed, it is God who has popped up. We have to say that this is, in fact, very unhelpful of God.

But what, then, flows from this? The story tells us that the Pharisees did not see what was going on. Does that mean that we, who hear this account, do now see what they did not?

In fact, at the end of the whole saga is an exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees which seems to undercut any confidence we might presume about our ability to discern the presence of God:

*<sup>39</sup>Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ <sup>40</sup>Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ <sup>41</sup>Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.*

Having heard this story, can the church – *you and I* – now say that we see? Surely this is a very dangerous confession, given the judgement Jesus casts here. If we would have no sin – surely the point of praying “forgive us sins” each week! – Jesus suggests that our confession ought rather to be, *We are blind*.

Even as we read these stories, as we confess the creeds, as we pray the prescribed prayers, as we take and eat and drink we confess, *We are blind, we are deaf, we are dead*.

This is *not* to say that these things do not matter, that we can simply include or exclude or change them because, after all, what does colour matter to a blind person, or a different musical key matter to the deaf, or food and drink to the dead? It *is* to say that our creeds, prayers, liturgies, ethics are not the things we are to see. Rather, we are to come to see *through* these things, *via* them, like lenses or icons. The religious eye sees the Sabbath, the miracle, the tradition, and is distracted by them. Yet these things are, rather, “dark glass” (1 Corinthians 13) through which we are to discern some other, refracted thing – lenses through which, by the grace of God, we might see some crucial aspect of our lives brought into focus, if only at the fleeting speed of light.

Put differently, our traditions – creeds, liturgies, law – are a kind of prayer which declares: We are blind; Lord, open our eyes.

Those who cling tightly to the form of the tradition must needs relax their grip; the tradition is not God and does not contain God but is the sign of God’s grace.

Those who reject the form of the tradition must hear that, in doing this, they claim no less than their allegedly dogmatic sisters and brothers to have seen clearly, just to have seen somewhere else. Blindness is called for here, also.

All that we have and are is God-given, that there might be something through which God might meet us. Why was he born blind?, Jesus’ disciples ask him. Jesus answered for that man and also for us: we are blind, that God’s works – *as* God’s – might be revealed in us.

Let it, then, be our prayer, that God might open our eyes to the light of the world – God himself in his Son – that we ourselves might become one of God’s uncomfortable miracles.

Amen.

\*\*\*