

Lent 4
19/3/2023

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm:23
John 9:1-41

Eyes to see

In a sentence:

To be seen by God is to be freed from the things we think we see

For the modern, scientifically-informed mind, a miracle constitutes a very particular problem: the violation of the ‘natural order’.

Faced with the claim that a miracle has occurred, the first modern response will typically be that the observation is wrong: what looked like a miracle was, in fact, not one at all. So, for example, a blindness or lameness ‘miraculously’ healed is explained as the releasing of the person from a psychosomatic condition through clever therapy. Certainly, some of the miracles attributed to Jesus have been accounted for in this way, casting him as a gifted therapist (in the modern sense).

If no particular explanation can be given for the miracle, we don’t immediately conclude that, indeed, God has been active. Instead, we are more likely to assume that our theories about how the world works are not yet extensive enough to cover all observed phenomena. This is no great crisis and is often the cause of great excitement as new scientific questions are opened up. In this way, we deal with the amazing and the (currently) unexplained by simply deferring understanding until more comprehensive theories are found. An apparent miracle would speak to the modern mind less about God’s power and more about our ignorance of the deeper workings of the world.

The point here is not to argue that miracles do not or cannot happen. For our present purposes, we can be happily agnostic about this. The point is that it would almost be a *waste of God’s time* for God to bother with miracles these days because we have built-in means of explaining them away. We are very, very hard to impress!

Of course, the people in our focus text from John are not modern scientific thinkers. This does not mean, however, that they were fools. The Pharisees are the lead sceptics in the story, and they are rightly sceptical: the blind man’s story is not easily believable. Yet their investigation leads to them being unable to deny that something has happened which has all the feel of a miracle. To them, as would not be necessary for the modern mind, this implies the presence of God in or through the one who has done this.

Yet there is another dimension to their reading of this particular miracle which we do not usually feel today. While they cannot deny that something extraordinary has happened – and that this might well be a sign of God’s own presence and activity – it seems that this alleged work of God has occurred in a way which violates God’s own command. This is the reason for the controversy around Jesus’ having done this on the Sabbath.

We must forget here that we have heard from Jesus in another gospel tradition – that ‘the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.’ In John’s account, Jesus appeals to no happy humanism to justify what he has done. In fact, he quite simply does not justify what he has done. Whereas in the other Gospels Jesus often engages in arguments and proofs of his point with his opponents, in John’s gospel we don’t hear these arguments so much as simply see the disorienting impact Jesus has on those who meet him; their ‘sense of sense’ is undermined. There is no justification

given here for Jesus' healing on the Sabbath but only the confusion of the Pharisees, echoing Nicodemus' exclamation a couple of weeks ago, 'How can these things be'? The miracle points *towards* Jesus as important, but its performance on the Sabbath points *away* from him.

Part of the reason Christians might not feel what the Pharisees feel is that we have heard this story. We 'know' what the Pharisee does not know: the perspective of the gospel, that Jesus is in the right and they are not. In the same way, we know what the woman at the well did not know (last week, John 4), and what Nicodemus did not know (two weeks ago, John 3). They all effectively ask 'How can it be?' regarding things which seem easy for us. We 'know' of the wind-like character of the people of the Spirit (which Nicodemus did not). We know of worship in spirit and truth (which the Samaritan woman at the well did not), and we know about the Sabbath in Jesus' teaching, which the Pharisees seem not to know. It is given to us who read these stories and have been formed by them to 'know', to 'see'.

Yet all of this brings us to a consideration of where today's Gospel text ends.

³⁹Jesus 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.' ⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'surely we are not blind, are we?' ⁴¹Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see', your sin remains.

Do we, in fact, *see* – simply because we have the benefit of having overheard Jesus' clash with the Pharisees? Can we *know*? In a relative sense, this must be the case. We go to a mechanic because he knows cars, to a doctor because she knows bodies, and to accountants because they know money. But in the gospel story, the knowing and seeing are of the absolute variety: the knowledge of God and so the true knowledge of ourselves. In this instance, the Pharisees' knowledge of God cannot accommodate Jesus because he exercises a freedom which seems to violate God's command: he makes no 'sense'. And because of this, nothing of what they know and by which they make judgements about the things of God amounts to anything. Your sin remains, Jesus says: you say you see, but you do not see, and so God is lost to you.

There is a kind of pessimism to be read from this story: it is as difficult to see the presence of God in the work of Jesus as it is for a man born blind to begin to see. Though their eyes and ears are open to see and hear everything that can be seen and heard, they do not see and hear.

The man who is healed in the story is, in fact, healed of two things: that which ailed him alone – his blindness – and that which he and Pharisees suffered in common: not seeing who Jesus was. His eyes begin to work as they should, and he sees the 'Son of Man' (9.35-37). Our reading today is only in a passing way about the healing of the eyes of a man whose eyes did not work. For the thing to see here is not eyes which now register light see but the presence of God in Jesus, which the eyes of the Pharisees both see and cannot see.

If there is a kind of pessimism in this story about our ability to see, it is met with the promise that eyes can be opened: that those born and living with what we might hesitatingly call 'spiritual' blindness can be healed even of that most dehumanising of conditions: seeing with only our own eyes and not as God sees. To be beginning to see as God sees – this is faith. Faith begins with knowing that we have been seen. And so faith is a kind of *innocence* which knows and yet does not, a *humility* which is open to being taught and so realises the gift of a *freedom* which comes from *not* having to know all things because God knows us, sees us and loves us. This is the true and life-giving

'human condition'. Our condition is, properly, not what we think we see. It is not the great changes, the seemingly overwhelming challenges or the apparently insurmountable injustices. These matter, of course. But to see *only* things is to be *limited* and *constrained*.

To be *seen* by God in that space, however, is to be *freed*. What is the Sabbath when God is at stake? What is Curzon Street or the fraught nature of life together or the frailness of human bodies and minds? What is death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, powers, height, depth, or anything else in all creation? Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8.38f).

For God. Sees. Us, so that we might see and not be afraid.
