

Seeing

“...who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

It was a good question to ask Jesus, I think. Or maybe not a ‘good’ question, as such, but rather a question that many people would have been thinking. And I think it’s the sort of question that people continue to ask today.

Many people assume that those who are healthy and wealthy and successful in life are somehow more blessed by God – and the other side of that is that those who are sick or disadvantages or suffering in some way are in that position because they’ve done something to deserve it – they have sinned in some way.

I guess it’s due to our human desire for ‘fairness’ in things – but our desire that things be fair often trips us up – not least when it comes to our relationship with God. The gospel isn’t fair, God’s grace isn’t fair – it’s not earned, it’s not deserved. Everyone has access to God’s grace – the ‘best’ person and the ‘worst’ person alike.

But I think as we go through our lives, we tend to judge people the idea of fairness. Good people should be rewarded, bad people should be penalised. That would be ‘fair’, wouldn’t it?

So if we see someone begging in the street we think things like: they’re probably hooked on drugs or gambling, or they didn’t save, or they didn’t work hard enough or they didn’t study hard enough, or whatever it might be.

Or I think back to 2001, when terrorists flew aeroplanes into buildings it must have been because America had done bad things – whether it was exploiting other nations or simply turning its collective back on God.

It’s natural that the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Clearly, they thought his blindness was a result of someone doing something wrong. Blindness was obviously a punishment – so it was just a matter of finding out who had incurred the punishment.

We can follow that logic... but I think there’s something very disturbing raised in the question. This man was born blind... so how could his own sin have caused his blindness? Could he have sinned ‘in the womb’? That’s a pretty big question. Or could he have been born blind because of a sin he would later commit? That would be pretty arbitrary, and take away any capacity to make free choices in his life. Neither of those seem to make sense, so the option is that it was his parents’ sin. But was it one parent or both? I know historically, some regimes have punished children for the crimes of their parents – but it’s generally been punishing the children along with their parents.

Whatever the explanation was, this man was blind. And someone had done something wrong to make him blind.

So, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

Jesus answers the disciples quickly and clearly: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him”

The cause of the man's blindness isn't his own sin or his parents, but the effect of his blindness is that the works of God will be seen.

The question we need to think about is who will see those works of God. Today's bible reading is 41 verses long, and only two of them are about healing the man's blindness:

After saying this, [Jesus] spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

That's it. Miracle accomplished.

And then comes all those following verses dealing with another sort of blindness.

After this man's sight is restored, first his neighbours argue about whether this man really was born blind or not. Many of them refused to see that a miracle had occurred. They'd rather ignore the evidence of their own eyes, than have to change their understanding of how things worked. They couldn't see God's works, because they are unwilling to do so.

"No, it's not really him – it only looks like him," they said, but the man insisted "I am the man."

They reject the evidence of their own eyes and the man's evidence. No, this can't be right. So they brought the Pharisees to the man. The thought the Pharisees would know what to make of what had happened – they'd be able to explain things.

When the Pharisees arrived on the scene they investigated the incident – they asked the man how his eyes had been opened. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see." (9:15).

This was a problem for the Pharisees, because this had been done on the Sabbath, and of course, no work could be undertaken on the Sabbath. God's Law, they held, was clear. There were no exceptions. The Pharisees couldn't see beyond rules and regulations of the Torah. They were blind to God's grace and forgiveness and mercy are unrelenting and unconfined. They shouldn't have been, of course, they knew their scriptures and that God had told Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." (Exodus 33:19)

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath."

But other Pharisees weren't so sure they could jump to that conclusion, because, you know, giving sight to the blind does seem to be a good thing – but this Jesus had clearly broken the Sabbath, so they others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?"

The Pharisees weren't seeing the miracle for what it was, because they were being blinded by their rules and regulations.

So they all turned back to the man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

He was really being put on the spot. His eyes had been opened, his life had been changed, but no one else seemed to care – they were all worrying about the details. In fact, they were arguing about the details.

He'd been born blind. He'd been in darkness all his life. And now he could see, and I think it's fair to say that what he saw was disappointing – people should have been joyous and celebrating for and with him, but instead they were arguing and they were doubting and they were trying to explain away the miracle that had taken place in front of them.

The man gave a fairly non-committal reply. I'm sure he was afraid of making too big a claim, so he replied, "He is a prophet." (9:17b)

The Pharisees and the crowd weren't satisfied, so they sent for the man's parents.

His parents were so afraid of being kicked out of the synagogue for being followers of Jesus (9:22) that they refused to say what had happened to their son: We know he was born blind, but we don't know how he can see now. Let him speak for himself, they told the Pharisees: He is of age; ask him.

The man's parents, who should have been joyful and celebrating, were blind to the miracle too.

And on the story goes, with them going back to the man himself, demanding that he, "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" (9:24-26)

I really like the man's next answer, his response to the badgering by the Pharisees. I think it's one that I would be tempted to give, but that I would probably later regret – as the man may well have done: He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" (9:27)

The Pharisees don't like his answer. Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!" (9:28) They held on to that certainty: "We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

But the man is no longer blind. And he's not blind to the truth, either: "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (9:30-33)

As the old saying goes, though, there are none so blind as those that will not see: To [the man] they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

They kicked him out of the synagogue, just as they threatened to do to his parents.

On what should have been the best day of his life, this man had now been rejected by his family, his community and his religious leaders.

But Jesus came back to him, having heard what had happened. Once again, he opens the man's eyes, but this time he opens them not just to see, but to see the truth.

Jesus found him found him, and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

"Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

This man's question reveals his openness to see the truth – an openness to see the truth that no one else in this story shows.

Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

And he worshiped Jesus. The man who had been born blind can see the truth. He believes in Jesus. He calls Jesus 'Lord'. Having seen Jesus for who he truly is, what else could he do but worship him?

Jesus then explained what was happening in this encounter: Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (9:23)

None so blind as those that won't see – and we heard that some Pharisees who were watching this exchange challenged him: "What? Are we blind too?"

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (9:41)

Where does this leave us, 2,000 odd years later? Do we see? Do we want to see? Do we have blind spots? We should be asking ourselves – as individuals and as a church – these questions.

We sing 'Amazing Grace', but we don't always appreciate how amazing God's grace is, and we sing 'was blind, but now I see' – but we don't always see... sometimes we look away.

So let's take the story of the man born blind that we've heard and explored today to heart – remembering that most of the story is not about Jesus healing physical blindness.

After all, who, in this story is not blind, in some way? By the end of the story, there's only one – and that is the man who was born blind.

Everyone else was blind: The disciples, who assumed that someone must have sinned and caused this man's blindness. The man's neighbours, who looked for another explanation. The Pharisees, who, holding on to their law and traditions, were unable to see the truth that was unfolding in front of them. Even the man's parents – who were unable to speak out because they were afraid of the consequences of so doing.

We're all blind, in some way, at least from time to time. Jesus didn't find fault in the blind though, he only criticised those who claimed to see. He cared for the blind – and the lame and the sick and the outcast – we read in Matthew's gospel (9:35-36), "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

If we recognise our blindness – our lack of faith or understanding – and turn to Jesus for help, he will open our eyes and show us the way. Jesus said, in the chapter before the one we've looked at today, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

We can be confident in that light because Jesus' lived and died and rose again to bring us into that light. No matter what we've done – or what we haven't done – and no matter how blind we might be.

Let's all open our eyes once more, open them to God's amazing grace, and let's see ourselves through the grace-filled eyes of Jesus. And may we help others to see themselves through those same loving eyes.

Amen