

John 9 **Too Blind to See**
Series: **Seven Signs in John**
Date: 17 March 2024, 5th Sunday in Lent
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: John 9

“In late 1992, sixteen women charged a US senator with flagrant sexual harassment. The senator’s response was typical and revealing. He first denied the charges outright. He then attacked the credibility of his accusers. Next, he issued an extraordinary apology. Faced with charges that for years he had been kissing and groping his staff members, sometimes standing on their feet while attempting to remove their clothing, ... the senator declared that he had never intended, “to make anyone feel uncomfortable.” Still, he advised the media that he would “seek professional help to see if his alleged behaviour was related to his used of alcohol.” Commenting on this case, theologian Cornelius Plantinga writes, ‘Here is an apology of major, almost metaphysical, elusiveness. According to the senator, nothing happened, but in any case he meant no harm by it, and, regardless, he might have been loaded at the time and so missed the significance of the nonevent in question.’¹

The senator’s response to being found out raises questions. Did he know what he was doing was wrong? Had he so convinced himself that what he was doing was ok that he actually gave the apology with full sincerity? It’s easy to condemn the senator’s behaviour as immoral and his apology as willfully deceptive and wonder was he really blind to the fact that what he was doing was wrong?

Today we are looking at the healing of a blind man in John 9. This 6th sign or miracle in John’s gospel doesn’t so much reveal who Jesus is as much as it unmask a fundamental human problem – it’s not just the flagrant “sinners” who have spiritual myopia (short sighted) – even the most religious, the most morally upright can be spiritually blind.

John 9 finishes with two very strong statements from Jesus,
Verse 39 – *For Judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.*

Verse 41 – *If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.*

It raises the question for each of us: Am I blind, or can I see?

Jesus’ words may be confronting, but let me invite you to reflect on what leads Jesus to say this kind of thing. We’re going to look at 2 things. First - **the problem of blindness** in the passage, and then for us in general. And then second, how **Jesus gives sight to the blind.**

Keep your Bibles open to John 9.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Eerdmans, 1995: 101-102

Blindness in John 9

This episode begins with a question. There's a man who has been blind from birth. Jesus' disciples ask: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Common Jewish thinking of the time held that sickness or disability was a punishment from God for sin. Actually, it's not just ancient Jewish thinking. We also see it in the idea of karma. The deeds you do will come back to you. For Buddhism and Hinduism that is in the next life, but in the popular imagination it's in this life. Taylor Swift sings to her ex boyfriend, "Karma's going to track you down ... sweet like justice, karma is a queen."

There's at times a certain natural logic to this – if you party abusing your body when you're young, chances are you'll pay for it later in life.

But Jesus says, 'No, it's not that simple.' For this man at least, his disability provides an occasion for the work of God to be displayed. And actually, whatever the back story, all sickness and suffering that we encounter provide an opportunity for us to bring healing and restoration. At least that's how I take Jesus' words in verse 4 – *As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me.*

Just as an aside, Jesus here points to the most important response to the problem of suffering and evil. It's not explaining it, rather it's actually doing something about it.

So Jesus heals the man. And just so you don't think that it's only modern people who are skeptical of miracles, the rest of the chapter is spent with everyone debating the merits of this miracle. "Did it really happen?" "Was this really the guy who was blind?" "No, it just looks like him." "Ok, so if it is you, where's the guy who supposedly healed you?"

Things become almost comical when the man is brought to the Pharisees. We're now told it was on the Sabbath that Jesus healed the man. And this raises an added complication – by making mud Jesus was doing something that bore all the hallmarks of kneading dough, which of course was work, and so forbidden on the Sabbath. Now there's not just the question of who sinned that the man was born blind, but now whether or not Jesus was a sinner: Because, on the one hand, Jesus had done this incredible healing – and so clearly must be on God's side. But, on the other, he'd broken the law. It's a question that has to be sorted before the Pharisees can believe that Jesus had restored the man's sight.

They don't believe the man – (after all if he was born blind, then it may well be the result of his sin...), so they ask his parents. “Yes, it's our son. Yes he was born blind and now can see. But how? Ask him yourself.”

So back to the man – “Look, Jesus can't have opened your eyes – can't you see that he's a sinner – he's broken the law?”

“Well you're the experts on the law – but one thing I do know, I was blind and now I can see.”

“Ok, but how did he do it?”

The man begins to see that the Pharisees are stuck – the certainties of their worldview are making them blind the plain truth of the matter.

“I've already told you – but you didn't listen. Or do you want to take notes this time? Maybe you want him to be your teacher?”

As the encounter unfolds the man who was blind sees more and more and the Pharisees, who style themselves as guides to the blind, end up seeing less and less. “We're disciples of Moses – we know that God spoke to Moses, but we don't even know where this guy comes from.”

The blind man spells out what should be plain as day.

“Now that is remarkable, you don't know where he comes from yet he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody ever heard of a man blind from birth being healed. If this man weren't from God he could do nothing.”

It's the final straw. This man too must be a sinner. He was born blind after all! And now he presumes to lecture these theologians about God! What insolence! And so they throw him out.

As the story unfolds we see what a confused muddle the Pharisees are in. In case we didn't get it, the contrast between the blind man and the Pharisees is made explicit in verses 35-41. Having had his eyes opened, the blind man is open to receive Jesus as the Son of Man, the one upon whom Jesus' has said God has entrusted his authority to judge. Did you catch Jesus' words?

“You have now *seen* him; in fact he is the one speaking with you.” It's not just his physical eyes that have been opened. His encounter with Jesus has opened his eyes on a deeper, spiritual level. He has grasped just who Jesus is. And like Thomas later in the gospel he believes and worships Jesus.

Jesus sums up the encounter. *For judgement I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.*

Some of the Pharisees get an inkling of what has just been going on – “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus delivers the knockout blow – “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see your guilt remains.”

Spiritual Blindness

Let’s take a step back. What is the problem for the Pharisees here? What’s the taxonomy of their blindness?

The philosopher Martin Buber once wrote that “if there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can, religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God.”²

It’s as good a summary as any for the Pharisees here. As so often in the Gospels, their policing of their own and everyone else’s morality blinded them from seeing those in need, in this case a blind man. We’re reminded of another occasion when Jesus healed on the Sabbath (he seemed to really have a knack for picking Saturdays) and they got stuck into him. He responded, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good, or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” As the tumbleweed blows past in the background of their silence we see too that their concern for morality has hamstrung their capacity to help those in need because they cannot see them. They cannot see the person, they can only see the law being broken.

But equally serious, if not more so, it is actually their religion that keeps the Pharisees from seeing God. They are unable to recognize God at work because how he has worked has challenged their theological system. Instead of praising God for opening the eyes of a man born blind they end up bogged down in a confusing debate over whether or not Jesus could have healed the man, when there he is, right before them!

Rather than being a means by which they honour God, in the hands of the Pharisees the Law, God’s law, is transformed into an instrument of self interest. Jesus has come, full of grace and truth, full of life and light, and they feel threatened. They envy him, his freedom, his power, and the fact that people are drawn to him. They are afraid of being wrong, of losing their power, their position in society, and so they try to kill him.

And it’s not only Jesus, when the man begins to show the flaws in their reasoning, they attack viciously. They use the threat of social exclusion to silence those who would side with Jesus or disagree with them. It’s why the man’s parents dance around

² Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 18, quoted in Merold Westphal, ‘Taking Suspicion Seriously: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism’, *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 1, 1987, pp26-42

the issue in their response. It's what happens to the blind man in the end. The Pharisees embody the problem which Karl Marx put his finger on, that religion can be a means of social control, a way for those in power to maintain their position.

The problem, Jesus says, is that they cannot see all of this. They are blind to it. In fact they think they are doing the will of God. They think they can see, but they are actually blind. They are blind to their own sin. They justify themselves by their morality and religion, and don't see that they actually need God. They cannot see they have a deep spiritual problem. And because of that, for all their religion, for all their moral performance, they are far away from God. Isaiah wrote, *these people come near to me with their mouth, and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.*³

And Jesus says that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of them, because at least they know they have a problem and need a renovation of the heart.

Now for us, we've had 2000 years of hearing about the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of the Pharisees. We know that they are the bad guys and that we would never be like them. We'd never be tempted to consider ourselves morally superior to others. We'd never attack when someone pointed out where we go wrong. We'd never be envious of the success of others. Would we? The truth is there is something of the Pharisee in all of us. I don't know about you, but I'm not very good at taking the log out of my own eye before I attend to the speck in my brother's. We'd do well to remember the story of the Sunday School teacher who after having taught a lesson on Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector then said to her class, "Now children, let's pray and thank God that we're not like the Pharisee."

If we're honest, 99.99% of the time we're blissfully unaware of the ways self-interest shapes our approach to God, to church, to our families and friends, let alone to work and the rest of the world. Our problem is not ignorance and education is not the cure. If that were the case then a PhD would take you closer to God. But the truth is we are all blind to the fact that we have a problem, a deep spiritual problem, and we don't want to know if and when it's pointed out.

"Unbelief," Christian philosopher Merold Westphal points out, "is not the only way of suppressing the truth about God. It is only the most honest." It's not only horny US senators who need to take a sober examination of the recesses of their soul. We need to consider the possibility that in our own obedience to God, "what presents itself as an altruistic virtue may be, in terms of motive and function, but an egoistic vice dressed up in its Sunday [best]".⁴ Or as Taylor Swift puts it in her song *Anti-hero*

³ Isaiah 29.13

⁴ Westphal, 37

Did you hear my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism
Like some kind of congressman? (Tale as old as time)

I've aimed my comments so far mostly at people like me, committed, devout Christians, because we're closest to the Pharisees, and I want to make sure I pay attention to the log in my own eye. But that spirit of self righteousness and moral superiority can affect those who don't subscribe to either Christian belief or Christian ethics, whether you're woke or right. It's a fundamental human problem that our sense of moral superiority can blind us to seeing God and our neighbour, especially if they might be our enemy. Proverbs 26:12 says,
Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Jesus teaches us that when it comes to God, the most dangerous position to be is when you think you can see, and so you don't need him. As much as it might hurt our pride, spiritually we're in a much healthier place when we recognize that we are blind and we need our eyes opened. What does Jesus say? "I am the light of the world"! He has come to shine his light into our darkness. He has come to open our eyes. Yes his light shows us ourselves, in all our folly and fallenness. But the more we see our darkness, the more we see his light, his grace and the immeasurable depth of his love.

Later in the service I'll be baptising little Windsor. The promises made in baptism are ones to turn away from darkness and pride, to ask Jesus to open our blind eyes, and to walk in his light all our days. This is what Mark and Ella promise on Windsor's behalf. And they are committing themselves to raise her in these promises as a child of light.

Jesus says, *For judgement I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.* Are you spiritually blind? Or do you claim to see? Jesus is the Light of the World. He invites each one of us to come to him, so that he might open our eyes to see him and know his love and power. Will you come to him today?