



# The scandal of suffering

## John 9:1-12

As we continue our journey through Lent, it is appropriate that we explore John 9, where we see Jesus healing a man born blind. However, there is much more at stake than physical sight. Jesus is certainly meeting a human need, but is also offering to us a deep spiritual truth regarding what he is always doing.

It is not only about healing. The disciples believed what many assumed – that there was a direct link between sin and suffering. Jesus confronts and denies this connection here and sees it as a moment to display the grace of God.

The fact that the blind received their sight would have been understood as a Messianic pointer. This miracle introduces some short significant teaching on spiritual blindness. There are many ways of looking at the passage, one of which is to note the stages in this man's growing understanding of who Jesus is. Another way is to reflect on the fact that the miracle arose from the disciples' questioning. A yet more fruitful line of enquiry might be to explore the rejection that results as the Pharisees take their stand against Jesus.

Once again, I comment about the use of light and darkness by John. The motif of light is introduced in the Prologue and picked up in the passage before us. It is clearly related to the concept of "seeing and believing", which is obviously associated with the idea that seeing has a spiritual context. It is no accident, therefore, that the ideas of sight and faith are linked together in the words of Jesus.

Light is a most powerful symbol. Lighthouses don't send out music or fire guns to call attention to their light; they just shine!

Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to celebrate a Festival of Tabernacles and we see this at the beginning of John 7. Three times a year, the city of Jerusalem trembled as the population is swelled by a throng of pilgrims who pour in for these great celebrations.

Three fascinating ceremonies are linked to tabernacles:

- The people processed around the altar waving small tree branches in their hands. (This may be related to the sovereignty of God).
- The Priests light a gigantic menorah (lampstand) which, from its place in the temple courts, could be seen from various parts of the city.
- Water was poured on the altar by the High Priest and a prayer was said by him that God would bring the Autumn rains.

The combination of light and judgement at this Festival provides a suitable basis for the teaching of Jesus on the dangers of rejecting him. In John 8:12, Jesus describes himself as the Light of the World – and those who follow him will always have the light of eternal life which, like the great lampstand, will always show us the way.

The light of Jesus is not a means by which we can avoid needing faith. It does, however, give us enough to inspire and generate hope. I have found these words helpful, "God will never leave you without light enough to take one step; don't stop walking till the light gives out." His light, of course, never gives out!



John 9 is more than a story about a blind man. As we read the passage, we become conscious of the overlap between the teaching of Jesus, what was happening here, and what was clearly taking place in the early church.

- The blind man brings to the fore all the questions we struggle with: Why do some people suffer loss and misfortune and not others?

Suffering is a scandal – for it is a block in people's way, causing folks to doubt, distrust and disobey. Suffering can do just this and we will not find helpful, slick solutions to suffering.

Let us look carefully at the passage. John introduces the blind man whose name is unknown, and the disciples spend their time in theological debate. They seem more concerned about the reasons for the man's blindness, rather than the blindness itself.

- It is possible to lose our way in analysis, rather than focusing on people.
- Causes do matter, but the healing will matter more.

We might ask what idea lies behind the disciples' questioning. Is it their curiosity? Do they feel guilty? Or are they perhaps showing compassion?

The Orthodox Jewish understanding of misfortune as a direct consequence of one's sins or the sins of one's parents is pre-supposed here. Jesus sees the occasion as anything but a time for theological discussion. For him, it is a time for practical help. Verse 5 is key and suggests that in the midst of darkness, sorrow, suffering and oppression, Jesus is the Light of the World. This again may well strike a note in the experience of the early church.

The passage takes the form of an investigation, and the blind man's testimony is unraveled in his appearance before the Pharisees. One of the causes of their complaint is that the miracle happened on the Sabbath.

We hear an initial testimony of the man in response to those who were questioning what was happening. He seems to acknowledge Jesus as a kind of prophet. This will not be his final judgement, for the once blind man will press on to discover the full truth about Jesus Christ.

He describes the healing in verse 15 and confesses Jesus to be a prophet in 17b. It is not only the blind man, but indirectly Jesus, who is being tried by the Pharisees.

Let us open up the passage and explore its relevance for us.

### **Jesus is rejected in the face of his goodness**

The vigorous questioning by the Pharisees will even lead them to investigate the parents of the man who has been healed. They will leave no stone unturned in their desire to close down the voice and mission of Jesus Christ. If in this passage there is a growing perception of the light of God and the spiritual insight of the once blind man, there seems to be dark scales falling over the eyes of the Pharisees.

Who has been the toughest person to whom you have had to explain the faith? What have you found to be helpful in dealing with people who don't want to know? Has your



faith ever led to your exclusion from a group of people? If so, this passage will resonate truth for you.

Rejection is not based on logic, and so often the truth of God and the light of God are to be found in such close proximity to suffering and rejection. The open confession of faith, linked to the healing power of Jesus, is the context in which the Pharisees launch their attack. It is hard to imagine.

The way both the disciples and the religious leaders concentrate on the wrong thing is not dissimilar to the way in which people in general behave today.

The goodness of God which is seen in Jesus is revealed in his actions, displayed in his concern and certainly articulated in all that he said. It is always a complex and sad statement of life that it is possible to reject the best.

- Rejection is a painful part of human experience.
- Rejection is central to the Passion account.
- Rejection opens up a door on grace ...

David Young's words have a chilling relevance - "No-one is dressed shabbier than he who uses his religion as a cloak."

Jonathan Swift in *Thoughts on Various Subjects* put it this way – "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

### **Rejection opens the way for a deeper understanding**

The Pharisees were anxious to settle the case against Jesus. They called the once blind man in, and we notice in verse 24 that they put him under oath. They are prejudiced against the man from the beginning. You can see this from their judgement of him immediately after his oath – but this former beggar was not going to be intimidated. He had experienced a miracle and he was certainly not afraid to tell them what had happened to him.

To the repeated question about the "how" of the miracle, the man enquires whether the Pharisees want to become Jesus' disciples also. The "also" seems to indicate that the blind man had decided he was going to follow Jesus. It was not, therefore, just a miracle; it led to commitment. Indeed, from verse 28, we could assume that the Pharisees already viewed this man as a disciple.

Jesus, the Light of the World, exposes sin and spiritual blindness and the falseness of people's judgement. He will be rejected as we move towards Easter and reflect upon the Cross, which may seem like the end yet will open up the way for us to understand the real meaning and purpose of God's coming into the world in Jesus Christ.

Lent is a time in which we reflect upon the journey of suffering which led to the cross. The Church's holiest and most joy-filled days flow out of events which are anything but joy-filled. It is through a deeper perception that we discover this.

The blind man gradually has his eyes opened and sees:

- Jesus as a human being – v.10.



- Jesus as a prophet – v. 17.
- Jesus as One to be worshipped – v.38.

Almost everyone fails the man born blind. The community fails, the religious authorities fail and even his own family chooses to put themselves before his welfare. The only trustworthy figures in the account are the man himself and Jesus Christ.

### **Spiritual blindness is all around us**

The reason for our Lord's coming was so the message and experience of Salvation could be received by all – but the result of his coming was that there were those who rejected him. This ought not to surprise us, for as one writer has put it: "The same sun that brings beauty out of the seeds also exposes the vermin hiding under the rocks."

This is not merely blindness at one point in time; it is prevalent at all times, including the present.

The unfortunate situation of the blind man can be linked to many situations we do not understand. We must be clear in our own minds that we do not want to explain away the mystery of suffering, but seek to discover how in the midst of suffering we may be given insight into the glory of God.

The religious leaders were in fact the blind ones and would not admit it; therefore, the light of truth only made things worse, primarily because they were unwilling to receive the truth that was and is to be found in Jesus Christ.

We are left with an obvious comparison between the blindness of those who were interrogating the once blind man and the blind man himself. The beggar admitted his need and he received both physical and spiritual sight. The religious leaders were blind, and yet would not admit it. We are very familiar with the saying that no-one is so blind as he who will not see. The one who thinks he has all truth, and there is nothing more for him or her to learn, has nothing at all.

The aggression of the leaders is so clearly seen in verses 28 and 34.

The Lord's answer to the Pharisees' question in verse 40, "Are we blind too?" Reveals an interesting paradox: "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

In the Lent season where honesty, repentance and new beginnings ought to be our agreed themes, these ideas have continuing relevance. The nature of blindness is identified in us all. Though our memory of our faith-walk varies greatly, "Once I was blind but now I see" is not just the experience of the instantaneous conversion.

We don't meet this healed beggar again, but surely he was a man who followed Jesus closely. He was excluded from the synagogue, which would certainly be a painful experience for him. If we understand the gospels to be not only a reflection upon the life of Jesus, but also an insight into what was happening in the early church, then this passage is extremely interesting.



In about 85 AD, the Jewish rabbis of the Central Council of Jamnia, which looked after the Galilee, introduced what was known as the Twelfth Benediction into the daily liturgy of the synagogue.

The gist of the "blessing" was in fact a curse aimed against heretics. Although it was not specifically against Christians, it had the effect of making it impossible for Christians to worship in the Synagogue unless they became secret disciples. In the light of this, John 12:42 is interesting also.

Some Christians find it quite easy to live in an atmosphere of rejecting others and holding back their support. They might have found it conducive to live in a church where heresy-hunting and being concerned to remove people was the norm. The lesson of this passage and many like it is that such negativity damages most those doing the rejecting.

In examining the nuts and bolts of Christian discipleship we know that attempting to hurt others and destroy good is to live with those who are enemies of the Cross. The rejected and the hurt will always find a compassionate heart in Jesus Christ.

Here is a man:

- cast out and rejected
- a blind beggar
- whose parents are even afraid to stand with him
- whose name we do not even know

Here is a man who makes a glorious statement: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see."

Any visit to St Petersburg would be incomplete without a trip to The Hermitage Museum. It is here that Rembrandt's famous *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is found. Henri Nouwen wrote a short book entitled *The Return of the Prodigal: A Story of Homecoming*, based on the parable and this painting. He tells the story of how he stood for an hour in front of the painting and his life was changed for ever. For him it was an account of grace as God turned him around.

Coming out of the scandal of suffering that is defined in this account of the blind man, we see his life was turned on its ear. He could now no longer live as a beggar through the sympathy of bystanders; his world was immeasurably enlarged and transformed. Jesus opened not only his physical eyes, but also his ability to engage with life at a totally new level.

In the midst of the Pharisees' interrogation of the blind man, he was summoned a second time and from his lips emerged the words that have inspired many songs and hymns: "One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (v.25)