

12 November 2006

"Seeing in More Ways than One"

Reading: John 9:13-34

Every now and again an old error, which we thought was dead and buried, resurfaces. One such error is the idea that misfortune and sickness are the result of particular sins. You may have heard someone say, "I don't know what I've done to deserve this!" The flip side of this comment is the sense of guilt one often encounters as a pastor. Something has gone wrong in a person's life and he/she assumes that God is punishing them for a particular sin about which they feel guilty. There certainly is a general relationship between sin and sickness. But we cannot infer that because there is suffering there must have been sin. We have before us both an indication of this erroneous thinking and a clear statement of Jesus that repudiates it. Is it not amazing in the light of Jesus' clear statement in the passage before us (not to mention the entire Book of Job) that people cling tenaciously to this idea?

"Who sinned?"

The account is a fascinating one. It all starts with a man who was something of a social reject. Jesus and his disciples are still in Jerusalem after the Feast of Tabernacles. In the vicinity of the temple there is a young man who has been blind from birth. Blindness, in that day and age, reduced him to sitting in a public thoroughfare and begging. It also meant stigmatization. His physical condition was believed to be indicative of divine judgement. The man was morally and spiritually suspect.

Jesus' attention was drawn to him. The disciples became aware of this and asked: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This is not quite as obtuse as it sounds. It was believed that a foetus could sin in the womb. So the man became an object of theological curiosity. Jesus moved immediately from a theoretical question to a practical one. The disciples wanted to know about the cause; Jesus focused on the purpose. They were asking: "How did he get to be like this?" Jesus was more concerned about what could be done for the man.

Some Questions

Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the saliva, smeared it on the man's eyes and told him to go to the Pool of Siloam in the south-western corner of the city and wash. This may seem strange. Just why did he do that? It was certainly not some kind of magical ritual. Jesus used a variety of 'methods' when healing the sick. There was always a reason for the particular approach. For example, he *touched* a leper. (Mark 1:41-42) He purposely took one man aside from the crowd and there was a 'two-phase' healing in this man's case. (Mark 8:22-29) In this case he was thinking of far more than the man's physical sight and the procedure was to assist him. It is also probable that Jesus didn't want to be around when the man was healed.

John recounts the miracle in a matter-of-fact way. We can only imagine how the man felt as he made his way to the Pool with mud on his eyelids and his ecstatic reaction when, for the very first time in his life, he saw. And it is not without significance that when he received his healing, he had no idea of where Jesus was.

The man presumably made a beeline for his home. Possibly he still lived in his parents' home. Imagine their astonishment - and their delight when their congenitally blind son arrived and was able to see. It is safe to assume that they asked him what had happened and that he told them.

The Neighbours

Soon the neighbours and those who had seen him begging became involved. Once again he is the object of discussion (as he had been with the disciples).

"Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." ("It can't possibly be the same man.")

But he put a stop to the speculation. He insisted, "I am the man."

"How then were your eyes opened," they demanded.

His answer was straightforward: "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

"Where is the man?" they asked him.

"I don't know," he said.

The Pharisees - Interrogation Phase 1

This called for some expert opinion, so they hauled him off to the Pharisees. This all happened on a Sabbath day. According to the interpretation of Sabbath-keeping in their oral law, it was prohibited to heal on the Sabbath. And they did not distinguish between the commandment of God in Scripture regarding the Sabbath and their own casuistic embellishment of the commandment

So they start their interrogation. They too want to know: "How did you receive your sight?"

"He put mud on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see."

You have to step back for a moment. This no doubt is the greatest day in the man's life. And nobody seems too happy about it! A congenitally blind man has received his sight and everybody seems to want to analyse and dissect the events which led to his healing.

Some of the Pharisees dogmatically assert: "This man is not from God for he does not keep the Sabbath." Others acknowledged that they had a problem: "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.

Looking for a way forward, they turned again to the man who had been blind: "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

He must have known that his reply would make some, if not all, of them unhappy. But, to the best of his knowledge, any one performing a miracle of this nature must have been sent by God, so he replied, "He is a prophet." Well, that couldn't have made the Pharisees too happy.

The Parents - Interrogation Phase 2

So they must look elsewhere for a solution. Perhaps he had not actually been blind in the first place. They summoned his parents and asked them a threefold question: "Is this your son? Is he the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

It is clear from the account that they had already been apprised of the miracle. Exactly how they responded to the news we do not know. Presumably they were astonished and overjoyed. They had, after all, lived

with their son's handicap since he was born. But apparently, this was not an unmixed blessing. Jesus was involved and that had some ominous implications.

They want to keep their noses clean. "We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself."

John explains that the authorities had already decided that anyone who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue - literally "unsynagued" - excommunicated. So they were playing it safe.

Interrogation Phase 3

Back to Square One! If they want to resolve this matter they will again have to speak to the young man himself. They summoned him and said: "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner." We must not think that be this they meant something like, "Praise God for your healing and forget about this unworthy instrument." Rather, they were saying, "Come clean, there's something you are not telling us. You cannot have been healed by this Sabbath-breaking sinner."

By this time the young man was becoming a little peeved. He sensed a really bad attitude here. A man has just completely changed his life for the better and these teachers, who had only ever looked down on him, are judging Jesus in the harshest of terms.

And he has been through too much in his life to be intimidated. So he responds: "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I know. I was blind but now I see!"

Sensing his (not altogether surprising) alignment with his healer, they are becoming quite irritated. But they continue cross-examining him: "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

His blindness hadn't affected his mental faculties in the least. If anything, they had made him a little sharper. He had what D. A. Carson called "the gift of sardonic repartee." So he uses a bit of sarcasm. "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?" (The "you" here is emphatic).

Well that incensed them! "You are this fellow's disciple," they said. We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

He's now into it and he's not giving an inch. "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from but he has opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of the opening of the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

At this they are absolutely outraged. They are stung by his impertinence but unable to resist his logic. Talking of logic, there's something I find interesting here. The Pharisees have presented a tight deductive argument. Logically, an argument is *sound* if the premises are *true* and the reasoning is *valid*. For example, I may say:

Premise 1 All Canadians speak French.
Premise 2 John is a Canadian.
Conclusion: Therefore John speaks French,

You could not fault my reasoning. The argument is valid but it is unsound because one of the premises is untrue. It is simply not true that all Canadians speak French (even if, by chance, John does speak French).

On the other, hand I may say:

Premise 1 All francophone Canadians (who speak at all) speak French.
Premise 2 Roland speaks French.
Conclusion: Therefore Roland is a francophone Canadian.

It is true that all francophone Canadians (who are not mute, of course) speak French. And Roland may well speak French. But he may be a Frenchman, living in Paris. My argument is unsound even though my premises are correct because I have inverted the order in the second premise (there is a technical term for this in Logic). If I had said: Roland is a francophone

Canadian; therefore he speaks French, my argument would be sound. There is absolutely no chance that Roland does not speak French, given the accuracy of the premises and the validity of the reasoning. That's what is satisfying about a deductive argument.

Now, here's how the Pharisees argued:

- P1. All who do not keep the Sabbath are sinners.
- P2. This man does not keep the Sabbath.
- C. Therefore - he is a sinner.

There is nothing wrong with the reasoning here. The problem is with the first premise (actually with both). By "keep the Sabbath", they meant according to their own (faulty) definition. On the assumption that their definition was authoritative, they adjudged Jesus a sinner. Reasoning valid; premises faulty; argument unsound!

The man who was born blind countered with his own bit of logic:

- P1. We know that God does not listen to sinners.
- P2. Nobody has ever heard of a miracle quite like this. (Obviously God listened to him).
- P3. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.
- C. Therefore - God must have sent him.

"Sinner" was their term, not his. He is presenting them with the stubborn fact that if they declare Jesus a sinner they have no explanation for the miracle. If, however, the miracle was performed by God, they have to conclude God heard Jesus. Since he does not hear sinners, Jesus cannot be a sinner.

Any veneer of decency evaporated. They showed what they really thought of him: "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us! And they threw him out." He was "unsynagogued".

A Happy Ending

Fortunately the story doesn't end there. "Jesus heard that they had thrown him out. He found the man. Don't forget that, to this point, he had never actually seen Jesus.

When he found him he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'"

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

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 worshipped him.

This is all about Jesus

We actually see and hear him in less than a third of the chapter. But it's all about him.

Last week we looked at the water ceremony that took place at the Feast of Tabernacles. It was this ceremony that furnished the occasion for Jesus' great declaration: "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink . . ." But that was not the only noteworthy ceremony at the feast. "There was also the lighting of four huge lamps in the temple's court of women and the exuberant ceremony that took place under their light. Men of piety and good works danced through the night, holding burning torches in their hands and singing songs of praise. The Levitical orchestras cut loose . . . with the light from the temple area shedding its glow all over Jerusalem.¹

It was in the context of that ceremony that Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (8:12) That statement caused a great deal of controversy. But not long after it Jesus gave this graphic portrayal. Here was a man who came out of darkness into the light. So, even when the young man, his parents, and the Pharisees occupy centre stage, it still is all about Jesus. Ultimately it always is. But the other players in this drama are not incidental. So let's glance at them in relation to Jesus.

⇒ **The Pharisees** represent those who reject the light and become blind. (9:39-41) Their problem never was a shortage of evidence. Their minds were made up. They belong to the category of those who love

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 337

darkness rather than light. (3:19-21) And their tragedy is intensified by the fact that their darkness was the darkness of religiosity. I don't think there is a darker place than that - anywhere!

⇒ **The man's parents** enter the story against their will. Their congenitally blind son had been miraculously healed. They had reason to rejoice and reason to align themselves, no matter how tentatively, with the man who had given sight to their son. But they do not wish to face the consequence of any semblance of sympathy with Jesus. If they had to choose between excommunication and their son's healing, they may even have preferred it if their son had remained blind. In the final analysis, *they belong to the category of those who choose not to take up their cross and follow Jesus*. I certainly hope they had second thoughts.

⇒ Then there are those who are represented by **the man who was born blind**. They don't know everything. But they do know enough. They were in darkness, but the true light has come. They were blind, but now they see.

This man started out at the roadside, blind, despised and dependent upon others. He knew virtually nothing about Jesus. But then Jesus came his way. Look at his progress.

- ⇒ He acts upon Jesus' word.
- ⇒ He receives his sight.
- ⇒ At first, he refers to the Lord as "the man they call Jesus".
- ⇒ Later he describes him as a prophet.
- ⇒ In the midst of an altercation with the Pharisees, he declares himself a disciple of a man whom he had never actually seen.
- ⇒ Later, when Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man, he asks, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"
- ⇒ Finally, he says, "Lord, I believe," and he worships.

Conclusion

Coming to faith in Jesus always involves a journey. It did in this young man's case. He moved from ignorance to an impersonal knowledge and then to

personal acquaintance. And what started as God's undeserved favour to him culminated in faith, commitment and worship on his part.

We can make religion so complicated. I shall never tire of saying: It's all about Jesus. It always was and it always will be. Are you on a journey of faith, a journey on which you are coming to know Jesus better? That, in the final analysis, is the only question that counts.