

Verses from John 9

Spiritual Blindness

You should have gone to

Many listening to me will require help with your sight. There are many outlets for optical services and glasses but yes, perhaps due to very successful marketing including sponsorship of referees of various hues, many people make use of Specsavers. Along with many others in the refereeing fraternity, I have been on the receiving end of jokes about referees not being able to see properly! But joking apart, we are very fortunate in this country to have support for glasses and optical care. Our family has greatly benefited not only from glasses and lenses but super care from the NHS and opticians. I will back them in a big way. Gavin, our son, will wax eloquent about the life enhancing differences brought about by vigilant opticians and eye surgeons. I recognise that isn't always possible but let's give credit where credit is due. But let's not speak or treat those who have to live with poor or no sight as though they were any less a person than the rest of us. Nor anyone with any other kind of restriction. The problem, if we adopt a demeaning or negative approach, is not with them but with us, for our lack of sensitivity, our failure to appreciate that the worth of a person goes far beyond their health. Hopefully, we've come a long way from John chapter 9 where those who were blind were blamed for their (or their parents') moral failings! But we need to remain vigilant – even with so much more awareness of the causes of health impairment we can be medieval in falsely attributing blame to those who are ill or live with a disability. I hope we're not going to blame those who contract the coronavirus.

Jesus heals

The passage tells us about another healing by Jesus. This time of a man who had been born blind. No form filling, no explanation of the procedures, no discussion about possible loss of income from begging. (Those of you who were into Monty Python's Life of Brian might hear bells ringing). No risk assessment. No written informed consent. Jesus just heals the man. In those days it was sufficient that good was being done to him. And further there was a presumption that this miracle, so obviously of benefit to man, was also a pointer to the nature of Jesus' life and ministry. Another strong hint that Jesus was "of God" – for who alone could effect such a

transformation but someone who was from God? This was a healing for the man's benefit AND a pointer to the glory of God being revealed in Jesus.

A contrary view

Not everyone was happy. There were those among the religious establishment who were extremely concerned about the claim, implicit in Jesus' healing, that his power was from God, and worse, that he might even be seen to be, of God. To them any such thinking was tantamount to blasphemy. What made matters worse was that blindness or really any kind of disability, especially from birth, was regarded as a sign of God's punishment on the individual for their, or their parents' wrongdoing or moral shortcomings, strange though that might sound to us. Even stranger, the thought that Jesus' intervention to heal might even be an undermining of God's punishment. So, on what might reasonably have been the brightest day of the man's life, he and his parents became the subjects of an investigation. The authorities were intent on discrediting Jesus and sought to identify some major fault in the history of the family, presumably so that they could pin something on them or perhaps they were just questioning whether he really had been blind. The fact that the healing took place on the Sabbath just made things worse. The parents were probed – how had he been healed? They didn't know – and in any case their son was old enough to speak for himself. The one thing which they knew for sure was that their son had been born blind and now he could see! The man himself was quizzed. He seemed willing to share the facts – the mud on his eyes and so on – he was a bit more willing to be drawn on the source of Jesus' power – “He is a prophet!” Don't suppose that went down well with the authorities! But what was even clearer – when they called him back and told him they believed Jesus to be a sinner, he proclaimed without hesitation “I don't know if he is a sinner or not, One thing I do know: I was blind, and now I see.” A wonderful testimony – not feeling obliged to make anything up, not being drawn into things that he hadn't fully worked out or got his head round but crystal clear on the basics, I was blind and now I see – and obviously very grateful to Jesus to be able to see.

Spiritual blindness

In our day and age, it is becoming increasingly “uncool” to express any meaningful faith or belief position. For all the talk of freedom, tolerance and acceptance of views there is a remarkable tendency to marginalise or diminish the significance of faith in general, and of the Christian faith in particular. The default position is moving in a

secular direction – and we need to be aware of that and be willing to resist it, without becoming intimidated or paranoid. Ideally, we should be courteous but straightforward. We have no need to be defensive or be apologising.

That said, there is considerable lack of understanding of what Christians believe and quite a gap of knowledge even about the facts of Jesus' life and ministry. There is still a view held by many non-Christians, that we Christians regard ourselves as BETTER than them. It would greatly help if we made sure we didn't claim that, but that we ensured that we act in ways that dispels such a view. As to who Jesus is - we can't assume that people know even the basics of Jesus' life. At best, he will be regarded by many as a good man, a famous teacher, a spiritual leader from way back in history. The idea that he might be the Son of God or Saviour or anything of relevance to everyday life in the 21st century will not occur to many. Am I therefore right in suggesting that there is a degree of spiritual blindness prevalent? It would be tempting to react adversely and perhaps go on the offensive, lambasting modern culture for its inability to appreciate God and his Son Jesus Christ. Some Christian leaders and ordinary church members have taken that line, though I would suggest that it isn't terribly helpful. Why? Because although well intended it is almost akin to blaming the blind man for being blind. Yes, I know that human beings can be perverse and can wantonly choose to distance themselves from God and the things of God but most people drift away from God, choose to wander off one step, one wrong choice at a time, until they find themselves quite remote from his love. I'm not saying that they are blameless, (all of us fall short of God's standards), but Jesus' strategy was always to reach out to people, offer them love and acceptance and encourage them to draw closer to him and to his heavenly Father – and then to go on to grow their faith and lead them into greater understanding and service. A strategy which ought to commend itself to us. There is all the difference in the world from bemoaning a neighbour's activities on a Sunday and getting to know them better and demonstrating love and care towards them! If they receive the latter, they may, come time, wish to explore the faith or come to Church to see what is prompting you to be such a good and kindly neighbour!

Of course, spiritual blindness is not confined to non-believers. Those of us who profess faith, who claim to be Jesus' followers are not immune from failing to discern the purposes of God and his plans for our time. We may become so busy, even too busy doing good things for the Church, that we miss out on what God is saying to the

Churches, on what HIS priorities are for our day and age. We don't suddenly get 20/20 spiritual vision when we come to faith. Spiritual insight and an understanding of the plans and purposes of God are much more likely to come gradually and grow as we put lessons into practice. The comment from Matthew about the need to take the plank out of our own eye before taking the speck from our brother's eye is pertinent. So less, pointing of the finger and more attention to seeking to learn from Jesus and do his bidding, with the intention of being found living in his way and demonstrating his love to our neighbour seems like a better solution to spiritual blindness in both us and those around us.

Uncertainty ahead

We live in uncertain times. That will have been said in every generation but I don't think there is much chance of being contradicted today. We see through a glass dimly. We don't know what is going to happen. There are dark clouds on the horizon. Perhaps there is an element of spiritual blindness but we need to take comfort from this passage and from the underlying promises of God that he is with us always. Like the man in the passage there will be lots of things we DON'T know, but wouldn't it be great to be able to affirm that once we were blind, but now we see – at least see and experience enough of Jesus' love and care for us that we go forward into the future, with all its uncertainties, with hope.

. Wash your hands by all means, but use them to pray too! May the Lord bless you!