

## Getting the picture in focus

A sermon prepared by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon for St Peter's Wolvercote Sun 22nd March 2020  
*Ref: John 9, 24-41 The Pharisees react to Jesus' healing of the blind man on the Sabbath*

This is the first time that I have written a sermon that no one will listen to. But as part of keeping our congregational life alive, we are putting sermons on the website while our normal worship together is suspended. Many people are making analogies between the situation in which we find ourselves because of the coronavirus and wartime. And in wartime, especially for our nation in the two great wars of the last century, many asked 'Where is God in all this?' The story we read in today's Gospel, about how the Pharisees react to Jesus' healing of the blind man, tells of a different kind of war: war between Jesus and the Jerusalem hardliners, in this instance a group of Pharisees who probably comprised one of the two smaller courts, or Synagogue Councils, in Jerusalem. And here too the question 'Where is God in all this?' is very central to the story. It is a story that John tells to make his readers see differently.

First let us look at the characters who are vividly drawn. There is the blind man himself, who holds on to the one thing he knows: he was blind, and now he can see. There are his parents, who are clearly afraid of the authorities and their power to excommunicate people – to shut them out from the synagogue. Then there are the Pharisees, who want to drive a solid wedge between Jesus and God, and who are clearly prepared to use ecclesiastical procedures in the process. And there is Jesus, who seeks not only to open the eyes of the blind man but to open the eyes of those present to a new way of seeing.

The blind man himself, when interrogated by the Pharisees, insists that Jesus' has opened his eyes, whereas the Pharisees want to focus on God, not Jesus, whom they regard as a sinner, not least for healing on the Sabbath. John wants us to see that the man IS giving God the glory by sticking to his story, because God must have been working through Jesus. Later in the story when Jesus asks the blind man if he believes in the 'son of man', he not surprisingly asks for more clarity. Jesus reveals that he himself is the son of man and he then responds simply 'Lord, I believe'. The blind man could symbolise many Christians who may not be able to put their understanding and faith into theologically correct language but can still witness to what they believe. Many of us may share this feeling, even though we may have heard many sermons and read widely. What we may find difficult to understand with our intellect, we can still feel in our hearts. Through centuries of Christian faith, many have held on to their experience in this way.

John also wants us to see that the Pharisees' view of Sabbath-breaking was wrong. God is opening a new world of healing and hope. The Pharisees stick to their own self-imposed interpretation of the law, but this is out of tune with God's plan. Their assumption – which would have been common to most people at the time – is that the man's blindness must arise from either his own or his parents' sins. Today this strikes us as grotesque and callous, but it is a perspective that has not entirely disappeared from organised religion today. John wants his readers to see that the man's blindness has nothing to do with sin, but that Jesus' presence can heal them physically, mentally and spiritually. John is leading his readers to the light: he wants them to realise that Jesus is preparing the way, as Moses once did, for the great new Exodus, an exodus that will set them free not only from blindness but from sin and death.

The Pharisees' essential problem is that they are trapped. They have constructed a system within which they will never see their errors. It is a closed system, like a sealed room, into which no light or fresh air can enter. They claim to see everything clearly when they can't. Their picture of the world is out of focus, and they have no means of correcting it. They were, alas, far from unique among those who have exercised religious authority down the ages, and not only in Christianity. Think of the Inquisition in Spain, the persecution of first Protestants under Queen Mary and of Catholics under Elizabeth; think of the fate that befalls those who convert to Christianity in some Muslim countries today. Atheist regimes like Albania under Enver Hoxha and North Korea today claim the same clarity of vision when their picture is tragically out of focus.

This raises the fundamental question: who gets to say when the picture is in focus? Who interprets it? This is ultimately a question of authority and judgement. Who has the right to identify those who are seeing clearly and to guide others from a fuzzy, distorted image of the world into true light? For the man who was blind, of course, it was Jesus. He came to see that Jesus was not just a unique healer, but one who brings God's light and truth: for this man, the picture came completely and clearly into focus, and he believes. The Pharisees may declare him born in sin, but he will follow the truth, even if those who are supposed to know the truth are suppressing it. The blind man is one of many individuals throughout John's Gospel who make this final step which John wants every reader to make. John's answer to the question of authority is that it is Jesus who will bring God's judgement to bear on all situations, who will set things to rights and bring the picture into focus. During Jesus' ministry it is his own presence which comes as light to the world, allowing those who respond to change to heal and direct their lives. But Jesus can only encounter a small proportion of people, even in his own land. He can't be everywhere at once, and his life on earth is destined to be short. After he has gone, it will be his presence within his followers, through the Holy Spirit, which enable a fragile new faith to spread to the corners of the earth.

We all need to try and keep the picture in focus, not least in what may be difficult months ahead. Only by checking back repeatedly to Jesus, can we be sure that we are standing alongside the man born blind, in a faith which is open to the continuing revelation of light and truth.

Amen