

Fourth Sunday of Lent

22 March 2020

Eucharist from St Giles Reading
celebrated by the Bishop of Ebbsfleet

Gospel Reading from John 9:

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ³Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. ⁴We* must work the works of him who sent me* while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ ⁶When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, ⁷saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?’ ⁹Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, ‘He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.’ ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.’ But others said, ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, ‘What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.’ He said, ‘He is a prophet.’ ³⁴They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ ³⁶He answered, ‘And who is

he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ ³⁷Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ ³⁸He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him.

Homily:

We have just heard a shortened version of one of the longest accounts of any healing story in the Gospels. (Please read the whole thing quietly on your own: it’s John chapter 9.) It’s an involved story, with many scenes and roles, and the leading man was a man born blind. The playwright Dorothy Sayers noted that you could transpose it all into a radio script without changing a word.

It all kicks off with a question from the disciples. “Was the blindness the result of a sin committed by the man himself or his parents?” To which Jesus answers, “Neither: it’s so that the *work of God* might be manifest.” (v3) Soon afterwards Jesus declares, “We must work the work of God while we can. While I am in the world, I am it’s light.” And he springs into action. He mixes earth with a little saliva, and daubs the mud on the man’s eyes (that’s an obvious allusion to the creation story in Genesis 2), and he tells the man to wash it off in one of Jerusalem’s public pools, the pool of Siloam (that’s an obvious allusion to the washing of baptism). When he returns, washed, he can’t find the man who healed him and spoke to him, and he is left to figure out, in the course of some rather bruising conversations, what is happening to him. What he cannot deny is that his life and his understanding has been transformed.

At the culmination of the story, he meets Jesus again, and discovers his identity and authority. His ability to see and understand is complete because he has listened: ‘seeing’ has come from listening. By giving him sight, Jesus has worked a new creation.

By the end of the story we too can see—that is, we can *grasp*, we can *understand*—that ‘God’s work’, the work which Jesus was intent on doing and revealing, is to make *and re-make* humanity; to create *and re-create* humanity.

And that is the perspective in which, scratching our heads like the man in the gospel, we can begin to understand what is happening to us in our present extraordinary emergency. Let me outline what I mean.

As so often in our life a major and inescapable challenge or reality is not just a *practical* question (we’ve been addressing our crisis with many practical measures) but at a slightly deeper level it is a *spiritual* question. The world we have built in the last half century and more has become highly individualized and commodified; everything is a choice, a transaction, a value: unless you are among the poorest of course, and have no such luck.

But in the few short weeks since we began to face our unseen common health threat we have also seen the awakening of a whole new range of qualities taking root: the protection of life; justice for those who have least by way of health or wealth; kindness and self-control; prudence and patience. We are rediscovering rather painfully what Christ has revealed: that God not only creates but *re-creates* humanity, and that

that death-to-self is the path to fuller life for all. The unseen hand of God is stretched out both to shield and to guide us as our humanity is being renewed through this very bitter collective pilgrimage

We are faced with a similar challenge to the that faced by the Pharisees at the end of the story. “So then, are we blind too?” they ask Jesus. He replies that blindness is not the problem; it’s the insistence that you *can see* that’s the problem. Accepting the possibility of being re-made, re-created by God, means learning to see ourselves *in truth*. Let us pray that in this deep and traumatic shared experience, a breach may open up in our lives that lets divine light in on the spiritual questions that humanity faces, and enables us like the man born blind to welcome the re-creating action of God.

Two prayers for you to use at home before Passiontide:

Almighty God, it is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power, and by your outstretched arm. Nothing is beyond your power. We turn to you in our need, to ask your protection against coronavirus which has claimed lives and affected many. We pray for those afflicted. May they soon be restored to health. Grant this through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities, and in all our dangers and necessities stretch forth your right hand to help and defend us, through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Collect for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, BCP