

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5. 8-14

John 9. 1-41

I talked last week about the way in which themes run through John's gospel like the warp and weft of a rich tapestry. In today's reading we touch on one of these themes; that of seeing and sight. Jesus said to Nicodemus, which we heard two weeks ago: *Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above; or born anew.*

The clue to this seeing of the kingdom lies in the prologue, speaking of the Word made flesh: *and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.* The notion of seeing appears about seventy times over the twenty one chapters of this gospel and is fundamental to John.

But this is not an easy story to navigate our way through. Because it is a story of Jesus, seemingly, miraculously healing this man born blind – applying mud and spittle to his eyes - at the same time as Jesus is also pointing to a spiritual blindness. What is this story actually about, we might ask.

In our own time the performance of Jesus' miracles has been a stumbling block for many people. In some ways believing in the miracles, as they are reported by the gospel writers, has been seen by some as a measure of a worthy belief, arising from the notion that the measure of belief in Jesus has been about believing in his ability to defy the laws of nature. Faith has been seen as a willingness to believe in the miracles. But what we have seen in our own time is many people stumbling on an insistence that belief is about literal belief like this – and have given up the quest. Especially for young people as their minds develop, especially in the latter years of secondary school and tertiary education, they cannot reconcile a gospel world of miracles and the contemporary world shaped by rational thought – if they are told that belief is about believing in the miracles.

In truth, the problem has been with the adults, not young people. Because the adults have failed to see the interplay over just this issue of the nature of belief, especially in the Gospel of John. Like seeing, believing is also a core theme for John. The epilogue for the gospel says: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Throughout the gospel there is always a tension between believing because of the signs and the deeper believing which is made possible by being able to see beyond the signs – the miracles as we have called them – to the life of God. This is the nature of believe Jesus points to; this is what matters. Later in chapter 4 after the meeting with the Samaritan woman Jesus says to a crowd who are looking for a miracle: *Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.* Later the crowd says to him: *'What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?'* Later John writes of the crowd: *Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.*

I suppose what bugs me on behalf of my generation – our generation - was that the adults had not grasped the nature of this believing which is about seeing the kingdom; They were stuck with the notion that being Christian was about believing things and following the rules. So when the post-war generations questioned their adults in their churches and were told faith is about blind-belief, they walked away.

But it seems that this tension, this paradox about belief was there in Jesus' time also; this tension between believing in Jesus' miraculous ability and the deeper belief which he points to. And so John explores this tension and teases us with this dilemma about the nature of belief which seems to be hard-wired in us. It really is the temptation that Adam and Eve succumb to; they want clear answers, they want certainty, to know the difference between good and evil. The fruit of the tree was a delight to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise.

The disciples want certainty; want to know who sinned – who was evil, who was wrong, who's at fault, who can we point the finger at, who can we condemn – the blind man or his parents. Neither says Jesus. But then - enter the pharisees; they know the answer to these questions about who is right and who is wrong; and they will let everybody know. They know they are right and everyone else is wrong. How convenient to be in such a place. How much to be desired; this knowledge. We still see it in our own time ...

But as the story draws to its conclusion Jesus says: *'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'* We can be inclined to think that judgement is about dividing good from evil, knowing who is at fault or, as in the disciples' question, who sinned. But judgement as described by Jesus is about being able to see the kingdom so as to know what truly matters; about this kingdom of radical inclusivity; it's about not condemning people or excluding them, but welcoming and including.

Belief as John portrays it is always the deeper seeing; a mature seeing. Paul on a number of occasions exhorts his hearers to pursue spiritual maturity. In the chapter prior to the reading from Ephesians we have heard, he writes: *speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.* As we talk about the Christian life as journey, as the early disciples of Jesus were called people of The Way, as we affirm as members of the Uniting Church that we are pilgrims, always on the way to the promised goal, our calling is to deepen our maturity in Christ, integrating our life experiences into our experience and understanding of God and the life of the kingdom that we are able to see through our life experience – at least through a glass darkly at any point on our journeys.

I mentioned a couple of Sunday's ago about the death of my brother-in-law. I went to his funeral on Thursday. It was a most remarkable Christian funeral. Maybe 350 people there. John and my sister Helen have been part of a very active Anglican church in Geelong for maybe 30 years. Ministers are always curious about how other churches do things; or don't do things. I found a couple of brochures when I was at the church; about their five-year strategy and about growth. Growth is at the heart of what this church understands the Christian path to be – in order that faithfulness and Christian identity might deepen. You might say that the motivation is to be able to see the kingdom in and around them more clearly by what individual members choose to do. Home groups are a central part of the church's life in which people share and support each other on the journey.

Maybe the last line of what Jesus says in this story is the paradox that we are left with. *If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.* The key to the Christian path is a kind of unknowing which John of the Cross writes of – a mystical knowing which knows, but doesn't know. This is the nature of the seeing which John's Jesus points to and which calls for humility as we make our way along the way.

In the first week of our Lent study we were reminded of the hymn which begins- Brother sister, let me serve you let me be as Christ to you. The second verse goes:

We are pilgrims on a journey  
and companions on the road;  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.

As we continue through Lent on the way to the cross we pray for new sight, new insights, new joy, new love as we make *our* way to the promised goal, confident in Christ's presence with us.

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