

## Sermon

People have always been fascinated by the contrast between light and darkness since long before Paul wrote to the Ephesians. In the creation story, as the spirit of God sweeps over the face of the waters:

God says: Let there be light! And there was light!! – and God saw the light was good, and God separated the light from darkness.

Later on – on about the fourth day, God made two great lights – the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night . . . We do not often have the experience of a completely dark night.

I remember our first night in Uganda. We had been told darkness came very quickly in Africa once it began, but the reality had not penetrated my consciousness, until I was out with the children on the other side of the compound, and it began to get dark. Within twenty minutes it was completely black. Not enough time to find my way back to our house with the buggy over a myriad of little tracks going in every direction . . . . I was stumbling about trying to remember which path I had taken in my erratic wanderings. The children were quite unperturbed, and assumed we would all get home in good time!!

Perhaps you have spent a night in the mountains or in the desert where the night is completely black – except for starlight – it is not common in these days of light pollution which invades the natural darkness to be able to find a completely dark place. Perhaps the best way to experience darkness is to climb into the cupboard under the stairs!!

But darkness is only a contrast for those who can see. What we have in the gospel reading this morning is the gradual understanding and awareness of Jesus as Messiah of a man who had been born blind, and had never had the experience of knowing what

it meant to be able to see. He was in complete darkness, and the story begins with the disciples puzzling over the nature of suffering and sin:

Rabbi who sinned? This man or his parents, that he was born blind?

The disciples were echoing a very common assumption that disability must be the result of some wrongdoing on the part of one of the people involved. Jesus' answer is unequivocal – neither this man nor his parents, and then Jesus continues, as he reflects on the nature of his mission. I suspect he must have further confused the disciples by saying that the man had been born blind so that God's purposes could be revealed. But perhaps that is just the gospel-writer's interpretation of this particular healing. John structures the whole of his gospel around the signs which point to Jesus being the Messiah. In this chapter we have the fulfilment of the sign:

'I come to bring sight to the blind'

And there are many characters along the way with whom we can identify, and from whom we can learn some useful lessons for **our** mission in today's world.

Perhaps, as this is Mothering Sunday we should start by considering the role of the man's parents. They assure the church leaders that he had been born blind, but they will not commit themselves to what had happened to him.

We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind, but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age. . .'

A complete cop-out. They do not want to get involved with anything mysterious – with anything that cannot be explained – above all, with anything that is not acceptable to the church leaders. They know very well that anyone who confesses that 'Jesus is Lord' will be put out of the synagogue. They will be excommunicated. Their Jewishness is a way of life for them, and to be forced out of the synagogue would be a very unsettling

experience. We do **not** know how old they are, but they are old in their ways. They can confirm that their son was born blind, but anything else must be explained by someone else. They are no longer responsible for him. He is of age!!

Are there times when we find it hard to say 'Jesus is Lord'? Are there times when we want to hide, and to keep our faith secret – particularly if confessing faith will lead to questions which we find it hard to answer. . . . But there is also the question of responsibility for their son. I remember reading in the paper a while ago about a man who smothered his own disabled son because he could not bear to see his suffering any longer. He might not have been fully responsible for his actions, but that is what he did – he killed his own disabled son. . . . In our story, this man who had been born blind was a well-known beggar. Clearly his parents were not providing for him any more. Yet. . . they were prepared to confirm that he was their son, but they did not want to get involved with who might have been responsible for his blindness or for his healing. Ask him! He is of age!

There were many people asking questions of Jesus – what he was doing and how and why – not just the parents of the blind man . . . . There were the disciples, observing the actions and remembering the words of Jesus . . . There were the neighbours, who put into words their puzzlement at what had happened to a familiar street beggar. So - they take him to the church leaders in the hope that they can throw some light on the situation.

The first meeting with the blind man is with the Pharisees – the religious leaders of the people – and they make some progress in the blind man's understanding of what has happened. When he is questioned by the people he says:

The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and said to me, 'Go to the Siloam and wash'. Then I went and washed and received my sight.

They said to him. 'Where is he?' He said, 'I don't know'

He was not a follower of Jesus, but he states quite clearly: 'Jesus the man' did this, but he does not appear to know what has happened to Jesus.

However, when he is hauled up before the church leaders, he is prepared to make the affirmation that Jesus is a prophet. He has obviously moved on in his understanding of what has happened to him. The first problem for the church leaders is that this is the Sabbath, and no man is permitted to do any work on the Sabbath. Healing is allowed, if the condition is life-threatening, but this man had been **born** blind - one more day is no big deal. **Why** did this teacher not wait until the **Sabbath** was over, before performing this healing? They do not get a satisfactory answer, and we are told they were divided. I guess there must have been much discussion about whether it was possible for a man from God to heal on the Sabbath. And, here again, Jesus was illustrating that their religious observance had got its priorities all wrong. And even the perception of the man born blind is changing. When they ask him outright:

What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.

He replies: 'He is a prophet'.

This is a considerable advance on his first statement about 'this man'. A prophet is a person who has been sent from God, and who interprets the ways of God to the people. Moses was a prophet; Elijah was a prophet; John the Baptist was a prophet; this man Jesus stands in direct succession to them. These were people who were revered by the church leaders, so they continue their investigations.

Next they call the parents of the man, and we have heard **their** witness to the fact that he was born blind, but now can see. So they call the man himself back again. They were really thorough in their investigations. It is rather curious, however, that they never **actually** make up their minds!! They start with the greeting: 'Give Glory to God!' which was their way of saying – now we want to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth!! And they continue: 'We know this man is a sinner' . . . .but notice . . . .the man born blind does not confirm this. Again he makes his statement about what Jesus had done for him – and he asks them:

Do **you** want to become his disciples?

Nothing could be better designed to infuriate the church leaders:

You are his disciples, but we are the disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but, as for this man, we do not know where he has come from.

And the man who was blind answers with a great statement of faith that what Jesus has done must be of God. It was so amazing.

Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind . . .

The church leaders then give way to anger, and say:

You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us.

And they drove him out.

It is then that Jesus reappears on the scene, and we are told that he seeks the man out. Jesus must have followed the investigations of the church leaders, and seen how the whole process had developed, and how the man himself had changed. The man who was healed has become a powerful witness for the Messiah – not just because of the healing that had taken place, but because he was able to stand up to the church leaders and not be afraid of their importance and their power over the people.

However, when Jesus finds him again, he asks him outright:

‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’

The man who was blind answers: ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.’

Jesus said to him: ‘You have seen him and the one speaking to you is he.’

He said, ‘Lord, I believe’. And he worshipped him. . . .

Jesus the **man** is the one who healed the man born blind; Jesus the **prophet** is in the line of succession with Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist; and now, for us, **Jesus is Lord**. This is the purpose of this whole chapter, and this is the climax of the story.

There is a little rider which reaffirms the sceptical position of the church leaders. Jesus opens up the whole concept of seeing into believing and understanding, and says again that he comes to bring judgement. It is the same message that we heard from the reading from the First Book of Samuel, about the anointing of David.

God does not see as we see.  
We look on outward appearances,  
but the Lord looks on the heart.

The Pharisees who are near him say: ‘Surely we are not blind are we?’

And Jesus replies:

If you were blind you would not have sin  
But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains.

So how can **we** share that experience of the man born blind? He can see so clearly what Jesus is doing for him – how can **we** understand? Do **we** live as **children of light**, or are we still in **darkness**?

In the reading from Ephesians, Paul gives two tests for those who live in the light.

First, live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true . . . People are watching. . . people know we attend church fairly regularly . . . does that make any difference to the way we make decisions? . . . to the way we live our lives .. ?

Second: Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them . . . Paul is quite clear that it is our actions that will determine the answer to these questions . . .

Eddie Askew worked all his life for the Leprosy Mission. He has written several books of meditations on Bible passages and this is his comment on this passage – bearing in mind his work at the Mission . . . . He writes:

We are recognised of children of light in the way we deal with other people – the way we deal with the **whole** human being’.

The way in which a patient is welcomed to the clinic;

The way he is examined;

The way he is given his tablets;

This is all part of evangelism . . .

God has called us to a ministry of healing.

When you expand healing to mean what the Bible means, it’s not just giving pills.

It is dealing with the whole human being. . . . (Eddie Askew)

Lastly, we are asked to try and find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

This is a common message from Paul.

It is not just our actions, but also our thoughts and our intentions.

At all times we must seek to do those things that are pleasing to God. . . .

Trying to live as children of light is like having the spotlight on us – both on our deeds and on our thoughts.

God does not see as we see.

We look on outward appearances,  
but the Lord looks on the heart.

I want to close with this Irish blessing, which is also a prayer:

May the blessing of light be on you

Light without and light within.

May the blessed sunlight shine upon  
you - and warm your heart

Till it glows like a great fire

And strangers may warm themselves

As well as friends.

And may the light shine out of the eyes  
of you,

Like a candle set in the window of a  
house,

Bidding the wanderer to come in

Out of the storm. So be it Lord. Amen.

Hymn CH4 540 I heard the voice of Jesus say