

4th Sunday in Lent 4 (A)

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

New Sight

It's many years since I've watched an episode of Coronation Street, but one line stands out in my memory. It was uttered by Jack Duckworth. He was in his back yard tending his pigeons and says to a young man who was complaining about how life was treating him, "But no one ever said life would be fair." That I remember this line probably says that I was quite young, and living under the illusion that life should be fair. Having now lived seven decades, I've discovered that Jack was right. Life isn't always fair. Sometimes it's downright unfair, and Jack's backyard wisdom is something that people in Jesus' day could have done with.

Here was a man who had been blind from birth. Jesus is asked, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They assume there's a connection between the man's present disability and some previous sin. Thinking like this is a way of trying to hold on to a belief in God's justice. If something in life seems unfair, but if you believe in a God who is all-powerful and 'all-fair,' one way of getting around the problem is to say that it only '*seems* unfair,' but actually isn't. There was after all some sin being punished.

This way of thinking sees life as a moral slot-machine. You put in a coin (a good act or a bad one) and get out a particular result (a reward or a punishment). Our actions have consequences. Good things often happen as a result of good actions (kindness produces gratitude), and bad things often occur as a result of bad actions (drink driving causes car crashes). But the slot machine doesn't always produce the expected rewards. Kindness is sometimes scorned, and drunk drivers sometimes get away with their crime. Life isn't always fair. So, Jesus says, you can't put it down to sin in either this man's life or his parents. Something else is going on here.

Jesus doesn't offer neat answers to the tough questions of life. Instead, he shifts the focus from the past to the present, from the cause of the suffering (whatever that was) to God's response to it in the now. It was, he said, an opportunity to reveal God's works – to show who God is and what God can do. The apparent unfairness of life is the raw material out of which God can create something new.

Compare these two responses to the man's disability. One is hung up on the unfairness of life and tries to supply a neat theological explanation. The other sees it as opportunity to display God's restoring life. When we encounter the unfairness of life we often don't have power over the circumstances that caused it. What we have is the power to choose how we respond to the apparent unfairness. And it's in our response that the creative life and love of God can be revealed. We see this happening in the wake of the cyclone. The devastation caused by this natural disaster is unfair, and for many, there's a sense of powerlessness. But we see a new power, a new creativity and hope being born in how so many people are choosing to respond. I don't accept, as Jesus didn't, that God was behind the cyclone. But we see who God is in the love and kindness of those rallying to help, and in what we may learn from this horrific experience.

Back to the Gospel passage. The healing is a very small part of this long passage. Most of it focuses on people's responses to Jesus and what he's on about. Jesus was posing a real threat to the religious establishment. Earlier, John tells us that the religious leaders had decided that anyone who declared that Jesus was the Messiah should be expelled. All the talk about Sabbath in the passage – about Jesus breaking it by healing on the Sabbath – is a sign that through Jesus God is doing a new thing and opening up a new world of healing and hope. Sounds good to us, but it threatened the clergy and their traditional ways of seeing God.

People have always found radical change scary, and when change is in their religion, it can be even more frightening – and I think that’s because religion (whatever form it takes) touches us at such a deep level. Here we see Jesus acting in a way that’s reframing how God and people’s response to God is understood. I wonder how you respond to that sort of change. How do you respond to new perspectives, especially ones that challenge deeply cherished positions?

The Pharisees reaction was born out of fear – fear of something or someone that’s different – fear of what they don’t understand. Fear is a response to what we see as a threat, and the Pharisees do the natural thing and defend themselves by attacking the cause of that threat. How often have we seen this played out in church life and in society.

The man’s parents are also afraid. They’re anxious for their social standing, perhaps even their livelihood, and how the religious leaders will treat them – so anxious, that they’re prepared to let their son face the full brunt of the questioning. “He’s grown up; he can speak for himself.” True, but hardly the position of loving parents of a son who has spent his life on the edge of society as a beggar. Fear leaves us trapped in the ‘life is unfair syndrome,’ unable to see what God can do and how we can respond with creativity and love. But as one of John’s letters says, ‘Perfect love casts out fear.’ The story of Jesus is about how love can banish fear. It can also be our story. As the writer to the Ephesians points out, our baptism calls us to live as children of the light; as those who live out the love of God.

The man was born physically blind. Jesus’ critics were blind to God’s ways. They were locked into their preconceptions and when Jesus presented something new, they couldn’t see it. The journey of faith gives us the courage to question. Is there another way to look at this? How might we see as God sees? When we’re open to doing that, we get some surprises, as Samuel discovered. He was given the job of finding a new king of Israel, so he looks for someone who appears powerful and mighty. As Jesse’s sons are paraded in front of him, God says, “No, not them.” We get that telling comment: “the Lord does not see as mortals see,” and Samuel ends up with an afterthought – the kid brother who has been left out in the back paddock looking after the sheep. Yet, he’s the one that God gives the nod to: the boy would become Israel’s greatest king.

God works outside our expectations and preconceptions. In the Gospel story, the clergy were blind to what God was up to, while a physically blind beggar, who lived on the outskirts of society, saw Jesus for who he is, and recognised what God was doing through him. Things don’t change much over the centuries. We can be blind to what God is doing – locked into how things have always been. But the story of God’s life-changing love isn’t over. God still wants to do new things with us and through us.

My prayer is that we might live as children of the light – that our eyes may be open to the wonders of God’s activity and the beauty of the divine presence. May we be given new sight.

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Hastings – 19.3.2023*