

# We need to see Jesus and know the truth about God

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Lent 4A– 1 Sam 16 1-13 Ps 23 Eph 5 8-14 John 9 1-41

They say seeing is believing. Today's Gospel explores this and its chilling opposite, wilful blindness. We begin with the disciples asking Jesus if the man was born blind because of his own sin, or that of his parents. It was a widely held view in the ancient world that unusual suffering came as a result of sin. We often ask a question that shows it's not such an ancient perspective either – *What did I do to deserve this?* But what a question to ask about that man! Had he offended God before he was even born!? Had his parents offended God, and God made their baby blind to punish them? *Who'd* been spreading such ideas? Who was really blind?

A/Prof Kylie Crabbe reminds us that this story comes out of a time when disability would have been very common; very visible; a time when average human life expectancy was about thirty-five. So the amount of life when you might expect to have 'normal' health would've been quite short. Maybe it was a comfort to think everything was in God's hands. You find a similarly cold 'comfort' in the eastern doctrines of karma and dharma

So who sinned? Jesus answers this confronting question by saying something that our translation this morning really distorted. It read, *the man was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.* Do they mean God purposely put this poor man through blindness from birth just in order to reveal divine power sometime down the track? Surely not. I find the more literal ESV translation more helpful; and some different punctuation. *It was not that this man sinned, or his parents.*

*But, that the works of God might be displayed in him, we must work the works of him who sent me as long as it is day. The man experiences God as a blind person. It's from there that he does what God's calls from him, just as as we do in our lives.*

Jesus introduces the healing by declaring himself to be the light of the world. Then he sets about ending the darkness this blind man has lived in from birth. He spits on the ground to make mud, and spreads it on the man's eyes. Some commentators feel a bit grossed out by this. But knowing this is John's Gospel, and that John so often links Jesus' stories with others in the scriptures, it reminds us of another muddy story. It's the story in Genesis about God making a person and animals from the dust of the Earth. Is John pointing to Jesus here as the one who can create sight from the dust of the ground? Is John showing us that Jesus, using the dust of the earth, can complete the creation of this person? St Irenaeus in the C2 certainly thought so: *this very same Word formed the visual power in him who had been blind from his birth; showing openly who it is that fashions us in secret.* Adv Haer V.15.3

Jesus said God's works might be revealed in this man born blind. And the gift of sight is the first we see. But there's more. This man bears ever stronger witness to Jesus and what he's done for him. First, he confronts the disbelief of his neighbours and acquaintances. They take him to the Pharisees. Some of *them* condemn Jesus for giving the man his sight on the Sabbath. Others, moved to wonder, debate this. They interrogate the man further. And again, he bears witness to Jesus. He tells them Jesus is a prophet. The Pharisees aren't satisfied, and send him up the chain of command. Now Jewish religious leaders refuse to believe what they've heard. They summon the man's parents to hear their testimony. His parents confirm what's happened, but fearing expulsion from the worshipping community, they direct the inquisitors back to their son. By now any debate between the Jewish leaders is over. They're in unanimous denial. *There's none so blind as*

*the one who will not see.*

So their second interrogation shows us the man born blind as the only one there who can see the truth. He tries to bring the Jewish leaders into the light, despite their reviling. Then they repeat that awful notion the story began with – *you were born entirely in sins!* In their fear, that cruel fantasy is what they choose to see. So they expel him; blacklist him from Jerusalem's worshipping community.

Jesus hears he's been driven out and finding him, draws him straight into new community. It's a beautiful moment. It's the first time the man born blind sees Jesus with his own eyes. Jesus asks him, *'Do you believe in the Son of Man?'* And the man asks *'who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.'* <sup>37</sup>*Jesus said to him, 'You've seen him, it's me; the one speaking with you.'* <sup>38</sup> *He said, 'Lord, I believe.'* And he worshipped him. Jesus shows him and us who God is really like!

Jesus, the light of the world has come. He opens our eyes to things once hidden. But John says his light will also cast shadows. We choose to turn to the light or to the shadow. This man's physical blindness ended. We saw his courage in the face of the people who tried to shut down his witness. It was a powerful display of the works of God that Jesus told us to watch for. The man turned to the light. But his opponents moved from open debate and dialogue to blinkered, unanimous denial. Their slip of the tongue about being born in sin shows they believed the superstition that a disability is God's punishment.

The man born blind turned to the light because of Jesus. He saw in Jesus who God *really* is. If seeing is believing, this Gospel really is Good News for us to share like that man did. Everyone needs to see Jesus and know the truth about God! Amen