**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 26 March 2017 Lent Four Who is blind? Who can see?**

**John 9: 1-41 Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind**

9 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,“ said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.“ 6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. 7 “Go,“ he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam“ (this word means “Sent“). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. 8 His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?“ 9 Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.“ But he himself insisted, “I am the man.“10 “How then were your eyes opened?“ they asked. 11 He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.“ 12 “Where is this man?“ they asked him. “I don’t know,“ he said.

**The Pharisees Investigate the Healing**

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. 15Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,“ the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.“ 16 Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.“ But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?“ So they were divided. 17 Then they turned again to the blind man, “ What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.“ The man replied, “ He is a prophet.“ 18 They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. 19 “Is this your son?“ they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?“ 20 “We know he is our son,“ the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. 21 But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.“ 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.” 24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,“ they said. “ We know this man is a sinner.“ 25 He replied, “ Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!“ 26 Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?“ 27 He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?“ 28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.“ 30 The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.“ 34 To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!“ And they threw him out.

**Spiritual Blindness**

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?“ 36 “Who is he, sir?“ the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.” 37 Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you. “ 38 Then the man said, “ Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. 39 Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind. “ 40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?“ 41 Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

**Contemporary reading** Excerpts from ‘Introduction: Treasures of Darkness’ from *Learning to Walk in the Dark* by Barbara BrownTaylor

This book is called Learning to Walk in the Dark because I believe that is a spiritual skill some of us could use right now .... It may be time for a walk in the dark ... If you are in the middle of your life, maybe some of your dreams of God have died hard under the weight of your experience. You have knocked on doors that have not opened. You have asked for bread and been given a stone. The job that once defined you has lost its meaning; the relationships that once sustained you have changed or come to their natural ends. It is time to reinvent everything from your work life to your love life to your life with God - only how are you supposed to do that exactly, and where will the wisdom come from? Not from a weekend workshop. It may be time for a walk in the dark ...Learning to walk in the dark is an especially valuable skill in times like these – or maybe I should say remembering how to walk in the dark, since people of faith have deep pockets of wisdom about how to live through long nights in the wilderness. We just forgot, most of us, once we got where we were going and the glory days began ... Meanwhile, here is some good news you can use: even when light fades and darkness falls –as it does every day, in every single life – God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going and no-one answers your call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down – but whether you decide to trust the witness of those who have gone before you or you decide to do whatever it takes to become a witness yourself, here is the testimony of faith: darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day.

Our Gospel story today falls into three sections – the actual healing story at the side of the road between Jesus and the man with Jesus’ disciples looking on. Act II is full of legalities of the law as the Pharisees investigate the healing. The third and final Act moves into metaphorical territory as the concepts of actual blindness and spiritual blindness are bandied between the Pharisees and Jesus.

In Act I Jesus comes across, as he walks along, a man who has been blind since birth, begging by the side of the road. This prompts Jesus’ followers to ask about the cause of his blindness. They follow the wisdom of the day – either the man himself or his family must have sinned for this affliction to have occurred. If the man had become blind after birth he would have been blamed, but since he was born blind it was a tempting theological argument to debate whether it was the man or his parents who had done wrong.

Jesus completely disagrees with this common premise. In his view, blindness is not a result of sin. In fact, this blindness, says Jesus, might be a vehicle for a spiritual demonstration. Notice Jesus doesn’t say God did this to the man to show off spiritual, but that now he is blind, godly things might be shown through him. There is a big difference here. God does not create a famine just to show off, but through a famine, sacred outcomes may take place, depending on the people concerned and their reactions. It is important to get the order right.

So he calls the man to him, mixes some clay (if you are at all squeamish just ignore the method by which the clay is made) and spreads it on the man’s eyes – something often done for pleasure, like a face mask, though forbidden on the Sabbath, (the holy day for the Jews.). Jesus orders the man to wash at the pool of Siloam (we are carefully told this means ‘sent’) and hey presto, the man can see. You might be astonished and sceptical – so were his neighbours. There is a delightful passage where they wonder if this new, seeing man just looks like the other, blind one. He convinces them he is the same man as before, only now sighted. Sometimes, if blindness is caused by a kind of encrustation sticking the eyelids together, this method of using a kind of clay poultice is simply a primitive healing technique which would well work – whether this applies to someone born blind is another question. We might not like the use of spittle, but it was considered at the time to have medicinal properties and, further, the waters of the Pool of Siloam were considered sacred and connected with the Messiah who was to come. So this story is full of significant signs – the healing itself, the clay made from spittle, the Pool of Siloam. We, the reader, are being told the back-story to this incident, rather like the TV viewer of a drama is given the clues which people in the drama itself cannot yet decipher. Whether or not you can believe this is a case where Jesus really healed a blind man, keep watching the story as it plays out – it is most instructive.

Then Jesus seems to have disappeared, and we have only the now sighted man and his neighbours present. They take him to the Pharisees, teachers of the law, for investigation – they are the ‘God experts’ after all! You might remember Jesus told the lepers to go to the temple to register their healing with the priests.

In Act II, we are exposed to the full force of the law. Jesus has blotted his Sabbath copy book 3 or 4 times – healing for one thing, making mud was also considered work, painting the eyes with the mud was ‘work’ too and probably the trip to the Pool of Siloam was longer than was allowed on that holy day. Tsk! Tsk! Working on the Sabbath! How many of you remembered that prohibition as children?

On Friday at the Inequality Network Hui which Paul and the Council for Christian Social Services organised in our Hall, we were reminded that people in need – poverty, or homelessness, or hunger, are often made to feel that they are the ones who are wrong. We often hear beneficiaries castigated for being lazy or on drugs or improvident. Yet more frequently poverty comes about from external factors beyond any one individual’s control – redundancies after an economic downturn, governmental policies not addressing issues, rising populations putting more demand on the housing stock, etc., etc. Just like this blind man and his family, the one in need has not necessarily sinned or done anything wrong, but is at the mercy of other forces beyond their reach. The Pharisees, however, stick with the thought of the day – this man is wrong or his parents.

With that predetermined outcome, they cannot understand the answers they are getting. Only the man who can now see is sure of what happened; sure of the character of the man he met and instinctively obeyed. In this scene, the man is clear, insistent, assertive and yet also humble. In the middle of disbelievers who are haranguing him, with his parents distancing themselves from him when under fire from the lawyers, he is steadfast in knowing what has happened to him. Like the woman at the well he has had a direct spiritual encounter and it has left on him, like meeting Jesus left on her, an indelible impression.

After spirited dialogue between the man, his parents and the lawyers – the dodging about is quite amusing - read it again when you get home - the man finally speaks his mind, showing remarkable command of both logic and the theology of the day, let alone courage

30 ... “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” 34 To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

The law is inadequate in the face of this sweeping act of healing grace.

At the beginning of Act III we find Jesus, hearing about all this kerfuffle, seeking out the man. He offers post-miracle pastoral care and theological interpretation! And, as happened with the woman at the well, this supposed sinner (apparently so sinful he was born blind, remember the current theory goes); *this* man is trusted with Jesus’ big secret. The Samaritan woman was a non-person for a Jewish man, yet she was told this secret which Jesus tells everyone else to keep under their hats. Now this man is entrusted with the good news. Keen to meet the Son of Man, he asks to be introduced. Jesus replies “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

Jesus trusts those who ‘get it’ with this secret, those whose spiritual eyes as well as their physical eyes are open and seeing clearly. We could say that to those who see, more will be shown. On this journey to Jerusalem we are getting a picture of the type of person who can handle the complexities of who and what Jesus is and the significance Jesus can have for a life lived openly and humbly.

Some of the frustrated and angry teachers overhear the latter part of this conversation. They take offence. “What?” they exclaim, “Are we blind too?“ Jesus replies: “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.” The man in this story did not claim great theological insight or command of the law, but he knew what he knew. The teachers of the law ***did*** claim theological insight and command of the law and yet they did not really know anything at the deepest and most important level of life.

I want to use Barbara Brown Taylor’s writing to invite you to wonder whether sometimes we make the same mistake. When you journey beyond conventional orthodox faith it can be easy to think we are more enlightened, more intelligent and more open to change and development than others.

Barbara offers the insight of learning to walk in the dark. Perhaps when the usual orthodox characters and stories and events in Scripture lose their veracity for us, we can take a short cut. This short cut allows us to avoid fumbling around in the dark. We can assume that all these stories are primitive, unscientific, made up, unreliable. Like the teachers of the law, we know better, for example, than to trust a healer who works on the Sabbath. We in our time feel we know better than to trust a story about healing a blind man.

We don’t then hear the invitation to ‘wash in the sacred waters’. Whatever that task might mean for us, we avoid it. We do not put any more work into interpreting what scripture is saying to us, because that would mean wrestling, in the dark with fears and anxieties we feel might be too much to bear. We might at the same time turn to the ‘light’ for our spiritual practice – to action; social justice and intellectual conversation and giving, to community service.

Perhaps though, the path through darkness is the place where we come to ‘know’ as the man born blind ‘knew’ while the teachers of the law were still floundering and refusing to see what was in front of their spiritual eyes. Barbara writes: “Even when you cannot see where you are going and no-one answers your call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone.” This darkness is sometimes called the Dark Night of the Soul and in its crucible, many ideas and allegiances are refined and honed. In the Dark Night of the Soul, say the mystics, it only seems dark because the light of the divine is so close it blinds us – we are not alone as the darkness might suggest but perhaps closer than ever.

Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to say: “There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down...”

I think Barbara has put her finger on the spot – it is hard to take that walk in the dark because darkness might just be that wrecking ball which brings down all those false gods. We might need to change our perspective. Instead of thinking the God of the church has proved inadequate for our rational age, how about reframing the God who has failed you and proved inadequate. How about realising that this God who has failed us might not actually be the real God – whatever that God is like - but is in fact, *only* the false gods we and the church have created together. Those false inadequate gods *need* to be demolished, thrown in the skip, but that does not mean we are now alone. There is still that presence, perhaps a darker presence than we imagined, something like the dark matter which we know little about and yet holds our universe together.

It will be a dark walk to discover, to come to the place of knowing, with no doubt a few stumbles along the way. But, the journey is satisfying if we are not like the proud Pharisee who refuses to take the journey. It is the journey the man born blind took. Perhaps all those years in the dark prepared his soul for the moment of true enlightenment.

At the time her book was published, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote this about darkness in Time magazine

“Darkness” is shorthand for anything that scares me — that I want no part of — either because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. The absence of God is in there, along with the fear of dementia and the loss of those nearest and dearest to me. So is the melting of polar ice caps, the suffering of children, and the nagging question of what it will feel like to die. If I had my way, I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love — if I could just find the right night-lights to leave on.

At least I think I would. The problem is this: when, despite all my best efforts, the lights have gone off in my life (literally or figuratively, take your pick), plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, nonetheless I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair. The witches have not turned me into a bat. Instead, I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion. I need darkness as much as I need light.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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1. http://time.com/65543/barbara-brown-taylor-in-praise-of-darkness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)