

Faith to see? (John 9:1-41) – Encounters with Jesus 14: The Blind Man

How do we gain true Spiritual Insight? The Blind Man in this encounter with Jesus, becomes the person who sees more clearly than anyone else.

A Slanging Match?

In the recent Political Party conferences, Angela Rayner, labelled the Prime Ministers cabinet as 'scum'.

Meanwhile, Boris Johnson in his party conference speech labelled, Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader, 'a seriously rattled bus conductor.'

We might wonder if our political debate is descending into schoolboy name calling, rather than a serious discussion about the best policies for our country.

We are looking at encounters that different people have with Jesus as recorded by John in his gospel. In John 9, it is a blind man who encounters Jesus and is miraculously given back his sight. Yet, unlike all the other stories in the Gospel, the main discussion is not between Jesus and someone else, but between the formerly blind man and the Pharisees. This story is not so much about the miracle, although the miracle is central to the story, but about the inquiry that follows on from the miracle.

Yet, the debate at the inquiry seems to descend into name calling. The Pharisees first of all accuse Jesus of being a sinner, then later on exasperated by the formerly blind man in verse 34 declare:

"You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!"

This last accusation picks up on the question that the disciples ask at the start:

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" (vs. 2)

The assumption behind the question is that the man's disability is a result of his or his parents sin. It assumes a kind of *karma* outlook: what goes around comes around. So, the logic goes, if you are suffering, you are just getting what you deserve.

Now, it is true that sometimes when we do wrong, we will suffer as a consequence - if you have an affair, your marriage will likely fall apart, if you rob a bank you could end up in jail, if you drink excessively you will die an early death. If you believe in a God of justice, it seems natural to expect good people to do well and bad people to do badly.

But, Jesus in responding to the disciples is clear, that this is not always the case. Sometimes, as in this case God allows suffering in order to help demonstrate his power. Just because this man is blind, does not mean he or his parents are sinners. Just because you see someone suffering does not mean it is because of their wrongdoing. Let's leave the judgement to God and not come to rash prejudiced conclusions ourselves!

At the end of the passage, however, Jesus says,

"For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." (John 9:39)

It is not people's suffering that reveals their sinful status, rather it is the way they respond to Jesus that shows their true nature. It shows whether they are children of darkness or children of light.

And in this passage it is the man whom Jesus heals, the formerly blind man, who far from showing himself to be a sinner, becomes a child of light, whilst the Pharisees, who are quick to accuse others of being sinners, show themselves to be spiritually blind.

So, what are the attitudes that lead to Spiritual blindness and which are the attitudes that bring us to the light?

2 Causes of Spiritual Blindness:

Fear:

The first cause of spiritual blindness is fear. We see this clearly in the attitude of the formerly blind man's parents. Their role in the story is partly to underline the reality and truth of the miracle. Their son was certainly born blind. They can do nothing other than point to the fact that something truly amazing has happened.

But, they do not want to go beyond that or be drawn into the discussion any further. Why? Because they are afraid! They have been told that anyone who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, i.e. God's special person will be cast out of the Synagogue. That meant being socially ignored by all their friends, family and neighbours.

So because they were afraid, they avoided accepting the truth of what Jesus had done for their son or what that might say about who Jesus was.

A couple of weeks ago, we saw a story similar to this one. A man who had been ill for a very long time was healed by Jesus on a Sabbath and confronted by the Pharisees. In that case the Paralyse man out of fear of the authorities was quick to betray Jesus and hand him over. Again, fear prevented him accepting the true implications of his healing.

Even today, many people avoid looking into faith in Christ, out of fear of what it might mean for their social relationships. How they might be treated by friends and family, if they start saying they think Jesus is God's Son and we should follow him. Fear is a barrier to the truth, a great blockage of faith and it will leave you in darkness.

Pride:

The second cause of spiritual darkness is pride.

It is the arrogance of the Pharisees that prevents them accepting the truth - vs. 34

Firstly, although they claim to be disciples of Moses, their judgement of Jesus is actually based on human rules. It was the human interpretation of the Sabbath regulation, that led them to conclude that Jesus should not be healing people on the Sabbath.

But, Jesus has already questioned their interpretation and reasoning:

"Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?" (John 7:23)

They are judging Jesus's actions, by the human standards of their day, not by the fundamental principles of God's law. They are not willing to accept that their manmade regulations might be wrong.

Secondly, they cannot accept that some of the facts about Jesus might show them to be wrong about him. Jesus has performed a miracle that no-one else has ever done: he has healed a

man who has been blind from birth. Although, even some of their number suggest this might show that Jesus cannot be a sinner, but must be from God, and although the formerly blind man makes the point forcefully, the Pharisees ultimately dismiss the argument without giving any real refutation. Their pride prevents them from accepting they might be wrong. It stops them believing the truth.

Thirdly, their pride shows itself most powerfully in the way they treat the formerly blind man. They say to him, 'How dare you lecture us.' In other words they see themselves as so superior to him, because of his blindness, that they cannot accept they could be proved wrong by him. So, they resort to insults.

Human pride is another great barrier to coming to the truth, another big blockage to faith. Are you allowing your pride to leave you in darkness?

2 Causes of Spiritual Insight:

In contrast to his parents and the Pharisees, the formerly blind man is a great example of attitudes that lead to Spiritual insight. Attitudes that it turns out are the exact opposite of the one that cause spiritual blindness. Rather than fear and pride, this man shows great humility and courage.

Humility:

The humility comes across most strongly in the man's initial response to Jesus. The description of the miracle is very brief, but the point is that the man is sent to the pool whose name means, 'Sent.'

Just imagine for a moment what that meant. This blind man, with his eyes covered in mud had to fumble his way across the city to the pool and wash, not knowing whether what Jesus had told him to do would work. That in itself takes a deeply humble acceptance of Jesus's words.

In fact there was a parallel in the Old Testament. Naaman, who was an important Syrian general had developed leprosy, a terrible skin disease. He had gone to Israel's prophet Elisha to be healed, but Elisha had not even come out to meet Naaman, but sent a message to him telling him to go and wash in the river Jordan seven times. At first Naaman was too proud to accept this. Surely, the prophet should have come out to him? Surely there were better rivers in his homeland? However, in the end Naaman let go of his pride and humbly accepted the prophet's instructions and went and washed in the Jordan and so he was healed.

It takes humility to obey Jesus's strange commands. We need to accept that he knows better than us. But when we do, then like Naaman and the blind man we take the first steps to a faith that truly brings us not just healing, but spiritual insight.

Courage:

As the inquiry builds and the questions become more challenging, this blind man relentlessly holds to the truth and in the face of the challenging questioning comes to a deeper understanding of the truth:

- Firstly, his neighbours are in debate. Is this the man who was formerly blind or does he just look like him? The man could have kept a low profile at this point, but he speaks up and tells what has actually happened, even though this thrusts him into the limelight. At this point, though, all he seems to understand is that **a man called Jesus** had healed his blindness. He accepts Jesus has healed him.
- Then he is brought before the Pharisees, who are debating who Jesus really is. Some saying he is not from God, whilst others are not sure because of the miracle. When they ask him

who he thinks Jesus is, he goes right to the point: Jesus is **a prophet** (vs. 17). In other words, he makes his conclusion clear, Jesus must be someone sent by God. Even though he could see that this conclusion was deeply controversial.

- Next after his parents have carefully avoided being caught up in the debate, the man basically admits that he is now a disciple of Jesus as he invites the Pharisees to become his disciples too (vs. 27-28). Now the man has moved from accepting Jesus as a prophet to seeing him as **his teacher**. Now, it is personal.
- Finally, when Jesus finds the man after he has been thrown out of the Synagogue, he accepts Jesus's self-designation as 'The Son of Man' and now he does not just decide to follow him as a disciple, but actually worships him!

By being courageous in the face of the threats, insults and intimidation of the Pharisees, the formerly blind man grows into a deeper understanding of the truth of who Jesus is. As a result Jesus does not just heal his physical blindness, but brings about a deep spiritual insight.

Will we have the same courage to stand for the truth about Jesus, in the face of threats, intimidation and insults? It is often when we speak up for Jesus in the face of confrontation that our faith grows deeply.

An ideal disciple:

In this encounter with Jesus, the blind man responds with humility and courage. As a result, he becomes a kind of example of the ideal follower of Jesus.

Like him, Jesus may send us into strange situations, into conflicts and situations where we may be insulted, intimidated, threatened and rejected. But will we like this disciple, be disciples who respond with humility and courage, so that we can become children of light in a dark world?