

## Surely we are not blind, are we?

Lent 4, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020

John 9:1-41

It's a pretty unusual experience being here at BUC with a near empty church. This place is usually buzzing with people, kids, and activities. And yet today we are a bit of a shell of our usual selves. I think in all that is going on and all that is about to happen in the next little while, this virus and the effect it has on us is going to change us in a lot of ways, some for the better, but there will be challenges ahead to be sure. Hello to you out there who are live-streaming, a most unusual way of doing church no doubt.

2020 has barely begun and already it's been a difficult year. There's been horrific bushfires, floods, disease, drought, panic buying, and worst of all, toilet paper shortages. The news has not been particularly rosy; each time I turn it on I feel an edge of anxiety or despair. I've even taken to removing the news app from my phone so I wouldn't be bombarded by so much negativity.

I've got to admit. I feel lately that my faith has been challenged. In fact I feel like I'm losing my faith...not in God — that's pretty rock solid. No, I feel like I'm losing faith in humanity. Humans seem to disappoint and frustrate me. Humanity has this growing tendency of late, that when given a range of viable options, we seem to inevitably choose the worst one.

In recent years we humans have been doing a pretty bad job of the whole taking care of each other, taking care of the planet, electing good leaders and so on. But I'm not here today to bombard you with my despair. In fact, despite all this, I am feeling hopeful. I'll come to that a bit later. Bear with me for a bit.

So how do we understand all that has been happening in the world of late? And how do we put it back together? And, most importantly, should we?

Last week my daughter Ashlyn and I were chatting and our conversation seemed to drift (as it seems to do so for just about everyone of late) to the problem of the COVID 19 virus. She asked me if it would mean that her school would have to close.

So in response I said to her, not yet, but it might be a possibility. She said to me "I hate Coronavirus! Why does there have to be coronavirus? Why does God let coronavirus happen?" Now, Ashlyn is not usually one to mourn days off school. We have a joke in our house that every Sunday night Ashlyn likes to sing the 'I don't want to go to school tomorrow' song with great gusto.

But questions of theodicy aside, I sat and listened to her complaint. I guess what was at the heart of it was the same as what's at the heart of many people all over the globe, and that is anxiety. We see it in the panic buying, the toilet paper stockpiling, the raids on supermarkets, and so on.

But what exactly are we anxious about? I think that at the heart of all this is the anxiety over the threat to the status quo. We love the status quo, especially here in Australia. And any threat or perceived threat to the status quo results in the mad scramble to preserve as much of it as possible. Can't go out and buy toilet paper? Buy as much as you can so you never need to miss a wipe? And it seems that humans will fall over themselves and trample others in the process to make sure that they do not miss out on preserving as much of the status quo as possible.

But there is a deeper problem at the bottom of all this. And our passage today speaks to this. It's the problem of human sin. We don't like to use the word sin nowadays. The word 'sin', for some of us, seems to be such an old fashioned or even antiquated idea. It hasn't helped that the church over the centuries has been holding up mere peccadilloes as the primary examples, rather than the serious and destructive behaviours that are highlighted in Jewish law and the moral teachings of Jesus.

Our passage today is long one, there is quite a lot going on here and I won't have time to examine every aspect of it. However, I wanted to draw our attention to the contest of theologies around this idea of sin. The story begins with a question from Jesus' disciples, who have been curiously absent from the dialogue over the past couple of chapters. We can deduce from their question that there are two schools of thought around the origins of human suffering. The first is that human suffering is a result of the sins of the parents visited upon the children, an idea that gains currency through a reading of Exodus 20 v.5, but is rejected by the prophets Ezekiel (18:2) and Jeremiah (31:29). The second school of thought argues that human suffering comes about as a direct punishment from God for human sin in the person's lifetime. This theology can be discerned in the book of Job through the 'friends' of Job, but is similarly rejected by the end of the book.

Jesus' response to his disciples is a curious one, in one statement he rejects both of these schools of thought. 'Neither' he says (v.3). But he says the man's blindness is due to God's desire to work in him. This may sit uncomfortably with us, but I will return to this shortly.

You may have noticed in the reading that there is a subtle play around the ideas of 'blindness' and 'seeing' in this chapter. Our man born blind is in the dark about who Jesus is up to this point. The unusual act of Jesus' spitting on the ground and making a mud paste and smearing on the man's eyes is unusual but has echoes of the passage in Mark 8:23. In this passage the blind man's sight is restored in two stages. The man's eyes are initially partially restored after Jesus puts saliva on his eyes; he can see people, but people look like trees walking around. It is only after a second touch from Jesus that his eyes fully restored. This serves as a metaphor for the discipleship community, who can't quite see who Jesus is, even through his signs or teaching, but eventually see who he is after the resurrection. A similar dynamic is at play here. The disciples are seemingly blind to the nature of what sin is, and the Pharisees are blind to the activity of God given their alleged preoccupation with the rules (Sabbath observation, etc.). As are the crowds and the friends of the man born blind who don't recognise him with eyes that can see. The Pharisees and the Judeans who investigate are blind to the work of God done in their midst.

In fact the only one in this story who sees is the man born blind. We get a sense of this later in the chapter when Jesus asks him:

Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "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 with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe."

This is his moment of true seeing, this is the 'work of God' that Jesus refers to earlier on. In fact at the end of the chapter Jesus condemns the Pharisees for claiming to be able to see, though, according to Jesus, they were as blind as the blind man (used to be). I understand this to mean that their very narrow worldview has restricted the work of God. The Pharisees primary concern is whether the miracle occurred on the correct day. The work of God is not the man's healing from his blindness, it is his faith.

As most of you know I have my feet in two ecclesial camps; Uniting and Baptist (through Grace Tree where I live), with a finger in Churches of Christ. I like to joke that I get the best of all ecclesial worlds. Earlier in our liturgy we borrowed a part of the liturgy we use in Grace Tree for our confessions:

We all carry fears, secret shames and unhealed wounds  
from the generations before us, from our culture, and from personal experience.  
They tip our hearts off balance, and incline us towards destruction.

What I like about this little phrase is that it names not just what sin is, but the nature of sin, what it does. Sin, in this understanding is the unbalancing of creation; creation that was created by God and called 'good' (Gen 1:31). A creation that was made perfect but was broken at the hands of humanity. What the Genesis story

names is the origins of this, the original mis-alignment, this unbalancing (Gen 3:1-5). Jesus in his ministry brings this mis-alignment back into balance through his acts of restorative healings (eg. Mk 1:40-45). In each of these restorative healings, Jesus addresses not just the physical condition of the person, but also the unbalanced social conditions that they find themselves in.

Jesus is accused in this story of being a sinner (9:16). But this is flipped when he addresses the Pharisees again at the end of this passage, whose eyes remain closed to the *work* of God. Jesus says to them:

“If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains. (9:41; a most puzzling passage)

Here, Jesus challenges them for seeing him through the law. They cannot get beyond this, it seems. But the man born blind had no preconceived idea of who Jesus was or what he was on about. He represents an openness to the work of God. This is the sin of the Pharisees; they had tipped their worldview in favour of the law.

When we think of sin in terms of this unbalancing we are able to see it in a number of areas; greed, for example, is the unbalanced distribution of wealth. Racism is the unbalanced idea of human identity, the unbalanced preferencing of racial types.

In Australia our obsession with preserving the status quo seems to trump all other concerns. Politicians pitch to the middle, to those who have much to lose if anything changes. They play on fears of losing all that if the other party gets in. We saw that play out in our last election. But our status quo is inherently balanced. I would go so far as to suggest that the preservation of an already unbalanced status quo, inasmuch as it enshrines and preserves systems of injustice, racism, greed, environmental degradation, and so on, is our national sin.

So why do we have the coronavirus? Why would God allow it? It’s a good question Ashlyn! But perhaps the more important question is why would humans create the conditions in which these things can happen? God created this world — finely tuned and balanced — and it is good. Humans create the conditions for this to happen. It is *humanity* that tips this good world off balance, and this is the problem of sin in our world. In the work of Jesus we are reminded of what it is to restore balance.

This past week we were given a glimpse of what this looks like in, of all places, Venice. With the whole of Italy shut down due to the virus, Venice has had to close its canals to all shipping traffic, including its famous gondolas and speed boats. With the lack of human activity on the waters, the silt churned up by water traffic settled and the canals began to run clear. The waterbirds returned and dolphins were seen playing in the ports. In a place like Venice in which human activity overshadows all of creation, it was a glimpse of what that slight shift towards balance looks like.

There’s no doubt that this virus represents a major break with business as usual. It has the potential to seriously disrupt the routine of our world and is a real threat to the status quo. In fact this whole thing is really annoying. It will make things like Olive Way extremely difficult to manage. But my hope in this is that the status quo will be disrupted.

It is our task, as Brunswick Uniting, as Grace Tree, as a church, as a people of faith, to work to restore balance to our broken world. Throughout this time there have been countless acts of kindness and care exhibited by so many people around the globe. On Thursday as I was leaving here one of our regular OW guests showed me a piece of paper she’d received in her mailbox. It was an offer of help in buying groceries, and offering whatever other assistance might be needed, from our neighbours directly over the road here to help. This is the stuff that gives me hope that we can once again find God’s balance.

**Peter Blair, 22nd March 2020**