

GAINING SIGHT AND INSIGHT

KATHLEEN RUSHTON interprets John 9:1-41 and suggests how this story of the man born blind can influence our lives.

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In the first 11 chapters of John Jesus is shown to be deeply concerned about social reconciliation. In a deeply divided society he invites disciples to create a new community (Jn 1:38-46), to work with him to “complete the works of God”. In his barrier-crossing ministry, Jesus moves among representatives of groups in conflict with each other and calls them into his new community. For example, he engages with Nathanael, a “true Israelite”, a nationalist, searching for a new king of Israel (Jn 1:47); with Nicodemus, a “ruler of the Jews” and “the teacher of Israel” (Jn 3:1-21); with the woman of Samaria (Jn 4:4-42); with the royal official (Jn 4:46-54); with those deemed ignorant

of the Torah (Jn 7:48-49) and with those with physical disabilities (Jn 5:2-9; 9:1-41).

Jesus speaks and acts openly in public – especially in Jerusalem, the centre of religious and political power (Jn 7:4). The story of the man by the pool (Jn 5.1-18) prepares the reader to meet the man born blind. These two, like the majority of the people, are physically and religiously marginalised by the religious leaders. The religious leaders’ attitudes towards those who are ignorant of the Torah are acted out in story form in this chapter.

Blind from Birth

Jesus and his disciples meet a man “who used to sit and beg” (Jn 9:8). Because he has been blind from birth, he has no choice but to beg. Along with others with disabilities, including the man who is chronically ill (Jn 5:1-18), this man is marginalised by society and religion (Lev 21:17-23).

The story focuses on the person – “a man born blind” –



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rather than a *blind* man. This can raise our awareness about how we refer to people with disabilities and ensure that such things as access to places is equally available for them. I was reminded of that awareness recently when a visitor who uses a mobility scooter commented on our “inclusive house”. This was because we have a ramp at the entrance and other features.

Opening the Eyes

Jesus anoints the man's eyes with clay and tells him to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Clay and water are Earth's elements – here they heal the body and carry the healing power of God. This is not a restoration of sight story because the man never had the gift of sight.

Sight is a gift of creation. Jesus's use of clay evokes creation – “the dust of the ground” (Gen 2:7) from which God creates Adam (*adam*) from the earth (*adamah*). Further, in the beginning of the Gospel creation is evoked by the opening sentence “in the beginning” and in the motifs of light and darkness. A cosmic struggle ensues between light and darkness. Jesus speaks of working the works of God while it is still day because when night comes no one can work (Jn 9:4).

Emerging and Growing

The irony is that the man born blind, an outcast, has his eyes opened to believe in Jesus while the learned Pharisees, who ostracised him, move into darkness and blindness. The man becomes an enlightened disciple. We have examples of understanding being reached through reflective conversation with Jesus – Thomas, the Samaritan woman – but the man born blind reaches understanding in the process of *confrontation* with the Pharisees (Jn 9:13–17, 24–34).

The man given sight witnesses bravely to the Pharisees about Jesus in contrast to his parents, the man who was healed (Jn 5:1–18) and the secret believer Nicodemus. His courage is like that of Jesus before the high priest (Jn 18:19–23). Thomas Brodie writes of this story as “the complex process whereby a person is created, comes to birth, grows up and matures”. The man given sight is an “emerging person” who grows in confidence and knowledge.

Developing Our Sight and Courage

This story begins with the disciples' question: “Who sinned?” because they thought of suffering as an occasion to moralise about the victim's part in the suffering. Jesus turned this attitude around to be an occasion to do the works of God – to relieve suffering and marginalisation and increase inclusivity. In this time of Lent we can discern the biases that prevent us from seeing and responding to the needs of Earth and the marginalised in our neighbourhoods and country.

Pope Francis speaks of three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with Earth. We are invited to come “to see”, “to open our eyes”, to confront “blindness” and to respond with love whenever we find *whakawhanaungatanga*/right relationship with God, people and Earth being damaged.

We can think of our “sight” as evolving as we become more and more aware of what damages relationships and

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how we can participate in healing the damage. For example, we can be blind to injustice and modern slavery around the world when we engage unquestioningly in unsustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption that protect our comfort and wealth at the expense of the common good.

We can move from blindness to sight when we discuss how and what safeguarding practices we need in our parishes so that we build a new culture in which children and vulnerable adults are included, loved and protected.

We can move into “sight” when we question our childish understandings of God and risk developing a deeper, meaningful faith as adults – a life-time journey.

We can move from blindness when we cease supporting “clericalism” in our Church and take up our own responsibility for Church as people of God.

Like the man given sight we are invited to join Jesus in God's mission – the “work of the One who sent me”. We are to grow up, to stand up, to mature in our knowledge and love of God, to draw on our rebirth through “water and Spirit” and to act justly and with kindness. Jesus speaks of the works he does and of the greater works that “the one who believes *into* him” will do (Jn 14:12). This is why we are always in the process of evolving into more insightful people. ☺

Reading for 22 March 4th Sunday of Lent



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