



# *Fourth Sunday of Lent*

## *Sermon by Revd Margaret Place*



Sunday 19 March 2023

### READINGS

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5: 8-14; John 9: 1-41

### *Let us open our eyes*

Good morning, and welcome to our online congregation. Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent, also known as Refreshment Sunday. It is also called Mothering Sunday after some older tradition in the church where young people who were employed in various households went home for the weekend and took flowers to their mothers. The 25th March which is nine months to Christmas was traditionally the weekend servants had off where they could visit their families, and this was the last weekend off for the rest of the year and at some stage, it changed to be the fourth Sunday in Lent. Mothers' Day is still celebrated on this day in the UK and not in May. But there is little "refreshing" in any of our readings today, and I want to focus particularly on our Gospel reading. It is a long one, and Jesus, who could be very disruptive at times, found his way into this situation and caused everything to be turned upside down.

It begins with the healing of a blind man. But this seems to be somewhat loaded. Not the simple "Lord I want to see" that we had with Bartimaeus, but a theological question. We must understand that blindness was one of the worst handicaps to have in these times. There was no braille, no guide dogs, and the white stick was not used either. A blind person was totally dependent, and it makes sense that this event took place near the Temple in Jerusalem. The blind would hang about hoping that Sabbath worshippers would be inspired to do one of their good deeds, called Mitzvot, demanded by the law, and give them some coin. We sometimes say "what did I do to deserve this?" when misfortune strikes, and blindness was regarded as one of the worst things that could strike anyone. And someone born blind was even more cursed than most, hence the disciples' question "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Fair question, and Jesus' answer satisfies none of the sub-groups that emerge on these occasions. "neither this man nor his parents, but this happened so that the works of God may be displayed in him." Take that! But then we think of people like Nick Vujicic who was born without legs or arms and what an amazing testimony his life has been and continues to be so. Or Joni Earekson Tada, who injured her spine in a trampolining accident when she was 17 years old, and has been quadriplegic all her life, and she has been total inspiration to all who know her and know of her. Jesus has surely been an inspiration both their lives, and one has to think of many whose adversaries in their lives has been the springboard for amazing achievements, and they have inspired and enriched us all.

But that doesn't mean that we don't keep working for healing and research into making things better for all the handicapped. And God was glorified in this instance by Jesus' healing of the man. But look at how Jesus went about healing him. It was not a simple touch, or a word spoken to him. He first spat on the ground, made a paste, put it on the man's eyes and told him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Why?

We don't know. We do know that saliva had healing properties and was used in certain kinds of healing, so maybe Jesus was doing that. But perhaps these were people who needed ritual – sort of first century Anglicans. The healing would be real if certain procedures were followed, and Jesus, seeing their psychological needs, used their “language” when healing them. The theological arguments around this seem to indicate this was a religiously conscious environment, so such procedures would be appreciated – a sort of sticking to the liturgy!!!. Or maybe this young man, having been blind from birth, needed to do something for himself. Getting himself to river – obviously he would need help for that, but washing his own face? And getting out of the river by himself? That would be the first step in his very new life and he would need a certain amount of faith to do so. Whatever happened, he was healed.

And then the trouble started. The people didn't believe it – Is this that beggar? No it's someone like him. Then they asked how it was done, and wanted to know who had done it. Skepticism – from a man who was now, for the first time in his life, was looking at them. Then the pharisees were brought in. These were the keepers of the law, and one of the things they did was assess whether what people did or wanted to do, was within Jewish law. But not all pharisees were the same. Those who followed Shammai said the law is the law, and if the man was healed on the Sabbath, it was not a healing from God because the law was broken. Followers of Hillel said to look at the event. If the result is a Godly one, then give praise, and don't worry so much about how it happened. These arguments explain what is what is happening here. It's a bit like dieting. This diet is better than that diet, and although you have lost 50 Kilograms, you did the wrong thing and you are going to ruin your health!

The poor parents got it next. To decide whether the man was healed or a lookalike who was making false claims, they got the man's parents to identify him, which they did. But by now, this thing had blown up so much, the scared parents, backed off. They knew that anyone shown to be following or supporting Jesus in any way was to be put out of the synagogue, and that would mean, to be isolated from the community. They acknowledged their son, but refused to go any further, telling the authorities to ask him.

By now, the previously blind man had had enough, understandably so, and pushed back rather forcefully. The pharisees established that Jesus had healed him, therefore he was consorting with the unacceptable. The man's anger at their missing the point - “once I was blind now I can see,” didn't seem to count. What did count was his goading them in reply to their questions – “do you want to become one of his disciples?” the pharisees decided that since he was born blind, he had been born in sin, and that now he could see through the healing of an equally sinful man, Jesus, therefore they were within their rights to cast him out of the synagogue. Then Jesus approached the man, identified himself, and the man worshipped him. Jesus made the point that the seeing were more blind as a result of their attitude than the physically blind.

One wonders what happened to this man? Did his frightened parents support him, or did he stay away to protect them and set about creating a new life for himself? We aren't told, but we do know he was a supporter of Jesus, and that must have continued to cause problems for him.

So what does that teach us? The first important thing is that change is very disruptive. Everyone was used to this man as a beggar. After seeing him healed, they neither recognized him, nor did they seem to know what to do with him. The pharisees wanted to keep things within their own parameters and used this healing more as a weapon to be used against Jesus, than as a cause to glorify God for a miraculous healing. It was safer that way. And we all hate change. If our government became all that governments were supposed to be, we would not have anyone to complain about, and we would hate having no one to blame for our misfortunes. And South Africans have been complaining about their government at least since Union in 1910, if not before – often with good reason. In any change we would find that all for those little

irregularities that have become so much part of our lives, we would be called to account, and we'd hate that. Imagine getting fined for parking in a loading zone or on a red line? All change is a threat, and change for the good has its challenges. In our Lent groups this week we talked about penitence, and we all know how hard it is. It means change, and we resist it strongly, even if such resistance is largely subconscious.

Secondly, it looks at the nature of community. We love our structures. We know what Anglican worship should be, and while little variations in liturgy or practice are acceptable to the broad majority, there comes a point where the most charismatic preacher or minister is tolerated if their expression of ministry is totally different, as a once off, but they would never be appointed to our church. Communities are important. They mean belonging, identity and protection. But they can also be stultifying, stifling of creativity, and ultimately counter-productive. Jesus would not have spoken of a church, had he not known and understood that an institution would grow up around his teaching, but he also could cut across destructive mores very definitely. The Spirit "blows where it pleases" and if the wind is strong, things fall over.

Then third thing is, that if WE are the ones changing, we may well be rejected by our community. We all know of those stories where an alcoholic reforms, becomes sober and takes his or her place in the community and then the spouse divorces them and marries another addict. That is one of the reasons why recovering addicts often have to move away from their old haunts and start a new life with others who relate to them as sober, productive, and not a victim. We all, throughout our lives become part of a group and the group settles down with everyone fulfilling a particular role. When you repent, are saved, and become a new person in Jesus, people get at best, disoriented and don't always know what to do with the new you. In some cases they are even hostile. This is what the healed blind man found, and if we are made new in Christ, there will be those that don't like it.

But Jesus didn't come to calm things down. He came to make them whole. Making whole means destroying what is evil, separating us from what causes sin, and re-making our very personalities. If Jesus is prepared to go to the cross for us, can we not let go of those things that keep us comfortable, quiet, and stuck? Being re-born means just that. The whole business of re-making ourselves means a lot of cleaning up first. And if Jesus works in the lives of anyone close to us, are we going to accept that in their change? We will find out that our role in their lives changes too. Let us open our eyes, and let Jesus make us see. I assure you, when the dust settles after change, the view is very beautiful. Let us not let this Lent go by without allowing Jesus to make very real changes in us, and creating new people, people who are truly, in Christ.