

## I SEE

### John 9

In the first part of our service we have concentrated upon how God sees us - truly, with x-ray vision, but also with love. But now we come to look at a series of interactions which Jesus had around the idea of how we see God, and especially how we see God in the person of Jesus himself.

The story begins quite simply. Jesus and his disciples are walking along and they come upon a man who has been blind from birth. The disciples make the usual association between blindness and sin and ask whose fault it is that he is in this plight. But Jesus says that they don't see far enough. He takes this man's blindness not as an opportunity to moralise, but as a chance to show God's power. And so he makes mud, anoints the blind eyes and sends the man to the pool of Siloam to wash. And the man finds he can see.

Now imagine yourself to be off to do your shopping in Galashiels. Sitting on the bridge over the Gala Water between the bus station and Channel Street there is a woman with a begging cup. I've seen her there once or twice, have you? You may give, or you may not, but don't you wonder why she is there? Don't you wonder if she is really homeless, and if so why, what has happened, is it her own fault or have unimaginable difficulties come her way? Does she take drugs, and if so is that the cause of her plight or something she does to try and forget? Is she an immigrant? All these things go through your mind as you cross the footbridge and go off to do your shopping.

But what if a few minutes later you were to encounter the same woman, walking confidently, head up, smiling, even laughing. Would you recognise her? You saw her before, but what did you see? The person or the situation? The person or the problem? The people who met the man who had been blind had the same problem. Was it him or was it not? They had always recognised him by his infirmity. How could this be the same man?

Read John 9:13-34

"Now I see." It can have so many meanings, can't it. It can be exclaimed with joy, "Now I see!" after someone has had their cataracts removed. It can be said with a giggle as a child suddenly understands the point of a joke. It can be exclaimed with relief as a student finally gets the hang of a troubling concept and rushes off to scribble it down before the moment of understanding passes. It can be used as a mere passing phrase, "Now I see that, but have you considered..." by a debater acknowledging a minor point but still sure of winning the argument.

For the man who was blind life changed completely. It changed so much that people couldn't even recognise him. But it changed in unexpected ways as well. In all his dark days, he must have envied those who could see, wondered what he was missing, thought longingly of how much simpler life would be if only he was sighted, could take a job, could live fully. Jesus heals him, and he finds himself at the centre of a storm.

If you have given money to the woman sitting on the bridge in Galashiels, you might not be too pleased to see her getting up and going about her life just like anyone else. You gave to her because she is not like everyone else, after all. And though you may have said to her or to yourself, "Poor soul, I hope things get better for you." If things get so much better immediately, you would be taken aback. You might even

suspect that you have been taken for a ride.

When we begin to see - to see who Jesus is, to see what God values, to see how God sees us, then life is not always simpler. The man who had been blind actually had lived a simple life before, the life of the beggar. But now he has to plunge into life in all its fullness. Jesus said that this was exactly why he came, to bring people fullness of life - and that is not always simple.

This is the beginning of Fairtrade Fortnight. Many of us shy away from the idea of Fairtrade, because we know in our heart of hearts that the implication is that most other trade is not fair. We would rather look the other way and go on in blissful ignorance letting price be the bottom line in our marketing. But once we have our eyes opened, once we see, then we can't go back - not with a clear conscience. When Jesus gives us sight, it will change our thoughtless ways of life. But then, as the man knew instinctively, even in his blindness, those who see are more alive.

When God comes to us, and shows his love by touching us, he wants to give us the gift of sight - of seeing the world as he sees it, in all its glorious and muddling complexity. He wants us to use our lives, and our minds and our actions and our choices to live fully, not shying away from the hard things, but, like the healed man, holding fast to what we know as we struggle to understand the things we don't. Irenaeus, the early church theologian, celebrated this aspect of our calling, of our liberation, of our challenge as Christians, when he said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

In our story, John shows how the relatively simple act of giving a man his sight, led to a lot more complicated discussion and understanding about how various people see God. Reading it, you know he is also asking his readers - including us - and how do you see God? How do you see Jesus?

*Sing hymn 567 Focus my eyes on you, O Lord*

How do you see Jesus? The Pharisees couldn't agree about it - was this the act of a good man or not? Could a good man do such a thing on the Sabbath, but could a bad person do such a deed? They didn't expect God to behave in this way. They didn't expect God to surprise them or challenge their understanding. They thought they had God all sewn up.

Could it be that we are like that? When did Jesus last surprise you?

It may be that you are thinking something along the lines of "Well, he's not going to surprise us, is he? We've got it all in the Bible. We know the whole story."

A couple of Saturdays ago the Buchan family went to the zoo. There were vouchers on the Rice Krispie packet to enable the children to get free entrance, and it was a good bright day, though very cold. A cold day is great at the zoo - the animals aren't as sleepy as they can be in the summer. The polar bear was not napping on his rock, but swimming round and round in his pool - great to watch. The tigers were on the prowl, and the black leopard came right up to us to show off his beautiful coat and rippling muscles. We saw the animals, in their enclosures, and having marvelled went on to the next one.

But Jesus is not enclosed in the Bible, like the animals are enclosed at the zoo. Jesus isn't there, kept in the Bible for us to visit when we feel like it, to marvel and then to walk on. No, Jesus is at large in the world, and, as C. S. Lewis said about Aslan, he isn't a tame lion. The Bible is a bit like a wildlife film, showing us some important things about Jesus. But even if you watch as many wildlife films as have been made, you can still be surprised at the behaviour of animals when you meet

them in the wild in real life. And Jesus is real and alive and at large. When were we last surprised by him, by how his words and his ways challenge us in our lives?

At the end of John's account we find Jesus in direct conversation with the Pharisees. Jesus seeks out the man who had been blind and reassures him - which he must be needing by now! Then he goes on to say "*I came into this world for judgement, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.*" Some of the Pharisees overhear this, and say "Surely we are not blind, are we?" And Jesus replies, "If you were blind you would not have sin. But now that you say 'we see' your sin remains."

People often think they see, through not thinking about things too much. In the 1970s the residents of Jersey would pass their now-infamous children's home and think - fleetingly, vaguely - of the children being given a good start there. Now they learn there is more to it. Now they and we are beginning to see bits of the bigger, fuller, more complicated picture. Having one's eyes opened is not always easy.

Who are those who, thinking that they see, remain blind? Are they presumptuous bureaucrats and politicians, who too often view the world through the simplistic lenses of party loyalty? Are they those who hang on to a too-facile world-view, where certain things of people or countries are necessarily good and others must always be bad? Are they people who believe that they have "seen through" God - like those who Jesus described as the path where the seed of God's word could not take any sort of root? Are they people, like the Pharisees, who see only what they expect to see?

Any and all of the above. God grant that we may be people who allow him to give us sight and to use that sight to live fully in this complicated world. God grant that we may be people who are always open to the chance of being surprised by Jesus, of being led to new paths of faith and action by the way he directs our opened eyes.