

## Learning to see

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
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*1 Sam. 16:1-13; Ps.23; Eph. 5:8-14; Jn 9:1-41*

As we all know, Lent is the liturgical season that particularly stresses personal change. All of today's readings have interesting things to say about this.

St Paul's letter to the Ephesians probably wins the prize for the most pithy Lenten advice. He says, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them ... everything that is exposed to the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light."

Those metaphors – of darkness and of 'unfruitfulness' are precise, and helpful. I know that in my 'darkness' – the things I can't see in myself – are lots of behaviours, emotional structures, and thought patterns that are quite 'unfruitful' in the sense of being useless or potentially harmful to me or to others. These things need to be brought into the light if I am to become free of them.

It goes deeper than that. The Ephesians reading also ended with a wonderful flourish about the point of the transformative process as a whole : "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you." The Christ light is, somewhat mysteriously, also about learning to see reality from a deeper and more profound perspective.

The story of the man blind from birth in the gospel reading operates at both levels. It provides one of the more detailed models in the gospels to help us understand how this waking up and learning-to-see process works in practice, and what our own role might entail.

The transformation process starts in the very first line of the story : "*As he (Jesus) was walking by, he saw a man who was blind from birth*".

So, before than man knows anything about it, the process by which he will come to sight starts with Jesus seeing him. To be more precise, it really starts with Jesus – the Truth – walking by, coming near to him unasked, and unexpectedly in one of those *kairos* times of opportunity. This man has presumably been living all his life as a blind person, at the bottom of the social heap, and begging for a living. So while his life does have a pattern, it is very limited and really not how it might be if he was living a full life. Like us, or at least me.

But the pattern of his life is about to be completely disrupted. The eye of Truth, the eye of change, has seen him. Little does he know what is about to happen to him ...

The particular trigger for change comes from a different, and not entirely friendly, quarter. The disciples ask Jesus a rather callous, if conventional, question about whether the man (who seems to be talked about as casually as if he were some kind of lab rat) was blind because it was he, or his parents, who sinned.

Jesus' response gives us a sense of what true sight is like. It goes straight past appearances and conventions to see the deeper pattern present in the situation. "He was born blind, so that God's works might be revealed in him", Jesus says. Which indeed we see as we watch this man grow as the story unfolds.

The next stage of transformation is the man's physical healing – and here it is the method of healing which is so interesting. This is not a story where Jesus simply says something like "your faith has made you whole" – maybe because this man hasn't even asked to be healed!

Rather, Jesus does a strange almost folk healer-ish ritual in which he spits on the ground, rubs it into the dirt, and smears the man's eyes with the mud.

This is a powerful image that probably needs to sit and speak for itself, as the image is more powerful than any words are likely to be. But two little factoids might help.

First, where today's NRSV translation says he made mud with the spit and the earth, the primary meaning of the original Greek word *pelos* is 'clay' – potter's clay ...

And *epichrio*, the word the NRSV translated as "spreading on" (his eyes), is the normal word for "to anoint on". In fact, the "*chrio*" part of *epichrio* shares the same root as "Christ" – the Anointed One.

So, the blind man's transformation is initiated by his being anointed by The Anointed One himself, who combines the water element from his own body, with the earth element from which all humans come. And this is all done very tenderly by touching the man's poor blind eyes. It's all quite sacramental, isn't it?

The idea that a transformed life should start with an anointing of course also resonates with our Old Testament reading about Samuel coming to anoint David. Similarly, Samuel also arrives unexpectedly, and then goes straight past all the normal suspects to find an outsider – the absent youngest who is God's chosen this time around. In fact, the Old Testament reading wins the prize for the best by-line for today's readings as a whole, which was "the Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

After he is anointed the blind man is told to bathe in the pool of Siloam. There is an echo here of Jesus' words to Nicodemus that we heard two weeks ago: "no-one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of the water and Spirit".

John underlines in the text that 'Siloam' means 'sent'. There are at least two layers of symbolism here. The most obvious is that the man is washing in the waters of that which is sent – of course Jesus was sent. The second more interesting layer is that the man himself was sent by Jesus to the pool, and once he comes out, he is not only healed, but he has also joined the ranks of the sent himself. Jesus' role is in part to proclaim the message of salvation to the world. As we shall see, the blind man soon finds himself doing this too whether or not he liked it or realised this would happen.

The next really important transformation-related event that happens is something that is not even stated directly in the text. And that is that Jesus disappears. For the vast bulk of this story, the man is apparently on his own. Jesus only reappears right at the end to ask him some rather deep questions.

Given what happens to the man, this is maybe a little disconcerting. But it is also reassuring that apparent absences may indeed be part and parcel of one of the patterns of transformation. Maybe having been given a very powerful healing and anointing the man has also been given the inner resources to cope and to grow?

He certainly has to do this, and fairly quickly, because pretty much the next thing that happens to him is that no-one recognises him and he finds he can't really go home. His healing and changed nature has suddenly blown his old patterns and life structures apart. It turns out that people aren't really happy for him – they are suspicious. Anyone who has experienced a completely new way of seeing life, and starts to show this by their behaviour, may well find themselves in a similar boat.

And as the neighbours argue among themselves about what has happened to him (rather than ask him) – which again I reckon is exactly what happens – he repeatedly makes the

exclamation “I am the man”. I don’t know about you, but for me that almost sounds like the sort of thing you might expect Jesus to say. There is a resonance of the trade mark “I am”, for example, maybe combined with Pilate’s famous *ecce homo* “behold the man” comment at Jesus’ trial.

Speaking of trials, guess what, the next thing that happens to this guy is that he finds himself on trial. Two trials in fact. Now ... let me see, who else in the gospels has two trials instigated by the pharisees? This formerly blind man’s experiences are starting to have some very interesting resonances ...

It’s interesting to see how the blind man responds. At first he seems understandably disorientated, and on the back foot. He genuinely doesn’t know how he has acquired his newfound sight. So when quizzed by other people with other agendas he simply tells his story – no fancy words or theological speculation.

There are some lessons in this for us. Maybe we shouldn’t expect to understand everything straight away. And maybe it is entirely appropriate for us to simply talk about what we know rather than try and invent explanations for things we don’t, and to grow as far as we are able. In his second trial the formerly blind man prefaces his response with the modest statement, “one thing I know” – and it is interesting just how effective that is when it is referring to something real. He had had an experience that opened his eyes. He didn’t claim to know what it meant, or the theological niceties. What he did show was consistent honesty, authenticity, and the courage of his convictions, even if it meant unjust punishment.

And maybe a deeper lesson is that the all the grilling of him, while ill-intended and unpleasant, is actually helpful to the man, spiritually speaking. Being grilled by the pharisees teaches him to see new things he couldn’t before – including how the world really works! As he tells and then retells his story he makes connections he hadn’t made before. For example, it’s the pharisees who ask him what he thinks about the man who opened his eyes. Maybe he hadn’t thought about that up until that point.

And that also points to the value of talking about faith matters. Perhaps we shouldn’t be that worried about whether we are ‘converting’ other people. The formerly blind man didn’t convert anyone by his testimony, despite its clear concrete manifestation. Talking about faith matters may be hard, but it is generally a growing experience for us – as I am sure that people in the home groups will attest.

My favourite line in the whole chapter, comes at the beginning of the second trial. After finding out the facts (which they now know, and they know are clearly against them) the pharisees have summoned the man back. They start off by asking him to “Give glory to God ...” by getting him to incriminate Jesus. It’s directly ironic because the pharisees are asking the man to lie, and to do someone in unjustly, and are shamelessly suggesting this is a way to give glory to God (!)

But it is doubly ironic because the man does in fact give glory to God – by sticking to his story, even though he know what the consequences will be – excommunication from the community – and indeed grows in confidence during his interrogation.

So, during this unexpected and fairly nasty trial, this man from the bottom of the social heap finds his voice and upstages the pharisees. Without overstepping his own knowledge or making anything up, it is he who ends up with the inner authority that they cannot match. The man who had bathed in the pool called ‘sent’, even gets to ask the pharisees whether they wish to become Jesus’ disciples!

They, of course, are forced to respond in the way that people in power always respond – by a

somewhat hysterical display of self-righteousness, followed by abusing their position so as to silence the person who had shown them up, and by excluding him. Alas, pharisees are alive and well ...

The final chapter in the man's transformation story only comes after he has been kicked out of his community, and presumably lost his social place such as it was. Socially, he is dead. But through his own participation, he has grown to the point where he has the preparation to hear and grasp a different sort of sight.

Because it is only at the end that Jesus reappears and asks him the faith question : "do you believe in the Son of Man?". The man wants to believe, but cannot recognise Jesus : "And who is he, sir?" Jesus himself needs to say "You have seen him, and the one whom you are speaking with is he". Now recognition happens and the man can finally say "I believe".

I don't know about you, but that feels to me like Mary on the morning of the Resurrection. Remember, when she first met Jesus she didn't recognise him and thought he was the gardener. It was only when he specifically called her by name and she turned a second time towards him, that she was able to recognise him. Similarly our formerly blind man may have seen, and thought he understood, but at the end there are further kinds of recognition involved in true seeing.

He has come a long way, our man blind from birth. He is the hero of our story today because he has also shown us something of what the spiritual journey is likely to entail. He walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and come out the other side with new ways of seeing – or as a child of the Light, as St Paul might say.

So there is more to this transformation business than is maybe apparent at first blush. It's easy to focus on the more obvious events like initial healings and to think that that is it. Today's story suggests that learning how to see is a deeper process involving stages of seeing, some of which started before we were even aware of them, and will end in ways we won't expect. It also suggests that while we may not be the originators of our salvation, we do have to participate in it with integrity. Which is why we should see Lent as a fruitful time, of bringing matters that are in the dark out into the light.