

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel – Sermon on July 21st 2013

(8th Sunday after Trinity)

Reading: John 9.1-41

It is customary to start a sermon with a joke. The joke that goes with this story you might know from the Vicar of Dibley who always shares a joke with her verger Alice after the end credits.

There is this nun having a bath when there is knock at the door. Who's there? she asks. It's the blind man! comes the answer. ...

And the rest of the joke is, unfortunately, not suitable to be told during a church service. The rest I sadly have to leave to your imagination for now.

But today's gospel story has all the elements of a joke in itself: it has misunderstandings, absurd questions and answers. And, most importantly and most commonly, people who absolutely don't get it.

In our reading today everybody seems to be confused. In the end those around Jesus don't even know whether they are blind or seeing.

The whole story is played out in several scenes and the confusion gets bigger and bigger. At the beginning we have the original scene where Jesus heals the blind man. It is triggered by the theological curiosity of his disciples:

“Why is this man blind?” they ask Jesus. Is it because he is a sinner? Or was it the sin of his parents which led him to be blind?

A valid theological question if you think of illness as a punishment for sin. We may find this kind of thinking slightly antiquated today. But let me assure you that it is still very much alive – at least in the hospital where I work.

A lot of patients do ask, “Vicar, why have I got this illness? I have always been good.” Patients see their illness sometimes as a kind of punishment for their behaviour. But most of the time they don’t know which crime they might have committed.

The assumption is that there must be a link between one’s behaviour or faith and one’s wellbeing.

And maybe there is – according to one news-story last month, Twitter messages written by Christians are happier and more positive compared to those of atheist Twitterers...

However, we get into very murky waters if we see illness as a punishment.

There may be a link to an unhealthy lifestyle – but even that is only a statistical link. One person smokes occasionally and dies young. The other person chain-smokes and lives into his 90s. These things cannot be predicted.

We cannot claim that an illness is a punishment or health is a reward. If you took this thought to its conclusion, then you would have to assume that only healthy and wealthy people are loved by God, and those who unfortunately attract illnesses or are unsuccessful must therefore not be loved by God.

Just imagine for a moment how a church with this theology would look like and whether you would like to be a member of it...

It wouldn’t be very Jesus-like either.

Back to Jesus and his disciples. Apart from not sharing their theological starting point I have another issue with the disciples. And Jesus’ reaction kind of shows us that he finds the disciples’ approach a bit strange as well.

The disciples don’t seem to be touched at all by the fate of this blind man. They treat him as an interesting case, but they are not interested in him or his fate.

One could describe their interest in him as purely academic. In a way, they are not better than the Pharisees later on who say about this man “You were steeped

in sin at birth, we don't want to have anything to do with you personally.”

Jesus refuses to enter into a theological debate. He refuses to allocate guilt.

Instead he puts the man into the centre of attention. Or rather: he puts God into the centre of our attention together with this man:

“This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life”.

Suddenly we are asked to see God at work in this man. The focus is taken away from sin or the question who is guilty.

Jesus does not talk about him or his terrible affliction. He talks to him. He does something with him. He sends him.

He lets us see him as someone in whom God works a miracle.

(Again one could question the theology behind this. Does Jesus really mean, that God made him blind only so that Jesus could heal him 20 years later? That would be a cruel thing to do. But I don't think we should go down such routes of thinking. In my opinion Jesus just wants to show his disciples how hopelessly wrong their assertions are. They've got it all wrong – and if there is any reason for this man's blindness then it is this opportunity for Jesus to show – once again – who he is.)

His act of healing takes the form of a new creation. Jesus spits on the ground, makes a paste with the dust and puts it onto the man's eyes. This slightly strange act recalls the first creation: *„Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground.“* (Genesis 2.7)

So in the strictest sense this is not a healing, but a new creation. This man is not healed of something, or restored to a former state.

It is far more than a mere restoration. It is creation at work, because the man never saw before. Now he can see. And he himself alludes to this later on. (V. 32-33)

We can see God at work in this.

And this is what it is all about: Jesus makes this man a test case for the people with him and around them:

Can they see what is happening?

Can they see that creation is repeated in front of their eyes?

Or are they blind to the blindingly obvious?

In the curious quest of the Pharisees to find out what all this is about, we can see how it can happen that you can see but still be blind.

All the facts are there – but they can't understand the big picture. They are blinded by their religious convictions.

They know so much about theology, about God, that they overlook the fact that God is working in front of their eyes.

They are convinced that the Sabbath is so holy that God surely cannot work a miracle on such a day. If Jesus was from God, he would be keeping the Sabbath. Since they cannot deny the healing, they are kind of happy to ascribe it to God, but they are convinced that Jesus must be a sinner, because he “works” on a Sabbath.

There is a danger in deeply held convictions – especially religious convictions.

They are not easily challenged. And this story should be a warning to us that we don't fall into the same trap as the Pharisees.

The more we know how God is; the more we know what is right and what is wrong: the greater is the chance that we won't be challenged in our faith any more. Even by God.

God can heal a blind man, but this story seems to tell us that he cannot heal spiritual blindness.

This is a warning to us that we also could end up as Germany's next top Pharisee.

Only very rarely we humans really know better than God...

A little story:

Three theologians, Augustine, Calvin and Barth find themselves waiting outside the throne room on the Day of Judgement. Augustine goes in first, and after half an hour comes out and says to the others: 'It was wonderful! I had all the mysteries of sin, grace and salvation explained to me!'

Next, Calvin goes in, comes out an hour later and says to the others: 'It was wonderful! I had all the mysteries of election, predestination and divine sovereignty explained to me!'

*Finally, Barth goes in. After two hours, God comes out and says to the others: 'I've still got no idea what this guy is talking about!'*¹

Finally, I want to come back to the man.

There is a lot of confusion about who he is: nobody seems to be sure about this man.

I think this mirrors the fact that his "healing" is in fact a new creation. He is now new. It is something that is beyond people's normal experience.

The neighbours ask: "Is this the same man?" – "No, he isn't. He just looks like him."

The Pharisees go and ask his parents: "Is this your son?"

The parents know who he is, but they don't seem to know much else.

Only the man himself maintains: "I am the man." (That is the only thing he is sure about...)

¹ With many thanks to http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/cart.php?page=grove_humour

He is the same, but at the same time he is new.

After his double grilling by the Pharisees, Jesus finds him in order to complete the creation of this new man. Although he can see now, he hasn't seen it all yet. The final passage is about the relationship between the man and Jesus. Jesus asks: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

The man is not sure: "Tell me, so I may believe in him", he answers. – Jesus' answer is interesting because he doesn't give an explanation in words but refers to his new vision: "You have now seen him".

So in this story the man's healing or rather his new creation becomes a prerequisite for the believing. His eyes have been opened to see. His new creation and faith in Jesus are thus linked:

In the end the man can say, "Lord, I believe," and he worships Jesus.

So this chapter has a happy end for him.

But for the other people around Jesus the chapter ends in confusion as they don't seem to be sure anymore whether they are blind or seeing.

We could number ourselves amongst them and ask ourselves with them:

Can we see or are we blind?

Or, more importantly: How can we make sure that we are not numbered amongst the blind?

The answer is easy.

We must strive to see like the blind man.

- * He listens to Jesus.
- * And does what Jesus tells him to do.
- * He stands his ground when he is met by hostile enquiries and he suffers for it.
- * He opens his eyes to the world and to Jesus.
- * And he believes and worships Jesus.

Amen.