

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>

Lent 4 – The Healing of the Blind Man (22nd March 2020)

Introduction

Hello folks and thank you for taking time to read through these thoughts. Since the outbreak of Covid 19 means that we can't gather together in the Church Sanctuary and sing our hymns (and I am really going to miss that...!) I've decided - as have many of my colleagues in ministry – to try and make sure that we all have access to something on a weekly basis that will allow us to sit down for a while in God's company... read his word... say a silent prayer and perhaps be encouraged by what God's word is saying to us in these challenging times.

This is the 4th Week of Lent – that season of the Christian year when we journey with Jesus towards the cross of Calvary before the sombre reflections of Lent explode into joyfulness on Easter Day with the glory of the resurrection.

In our recent Church services this has taken us through bible stories in which Jesus is tempted in the Wilderness (Luke chapter 4), when Jesus meets a Pharisee called Nicodemus (John chapter 3) and when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well (John chapter 4). If you're looking for some bible readings to follow over the next few days, you could do worse than go back and read those passages again – familiar words that always have something fresh to say to us!

This week, however, we continue the Lenten Journey by pondering an extraordinary story from John chapter 9 where Jesus heals a man who was born blind.

Before we read that passage from scripture, however, perhaps we can pray...

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord, today it feels bit odd to be sitting in our own homes trying to do what we would normally do in the beauty and peace of our own Church building. We would love to sit in that place today and look at the stained glass windows which tell the story of Jesus and his followers... to be encouraged by the symbols around us - the dove... the burning bush... the fish and the reminder of Jesus call to be fishers for him... We love to look at the boat that sits so high above the chancel which reminds us of the fishing community around us and the daily needs of your people.

But most of all, we love to be in that place where we see our friends... share our stories... sing our favourite hymns and hear your word....

All that we love... and today we admit that we miss it...

But we also believe that you, Lord, are here... here in our homes... that you join us on our sofas... and for just now that will be enough for us. It is enough to know that you are here, and we rejoice – even in the continued challenges of these days – that your faithfulness is never in doubt... never in doubt...

Enable us in these quiet moments to listen for your voice and to hear from your word and to experience the stillness of your presence and the affirmation of your love.

And hear us now as we bring you our prayers in the words that Jesus taught us to say:

Our Father

Who art in heaven
 Hallowed be thy name
 Thy kingdom come
 Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread
 And forgive us our debts
 as we forgive our debtors
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power
 and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading - John chapter 9 verses 1 to 16

This is the set reading for this week, the 4th Sunday in Lent. To read the whole story we should really follow it through to verse 41 but, at this time, we simply read the first 16 verses...

“As he (Jesus) went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

3 ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’

6 After saying this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. 7 ‘Go,’ he told him, ‘wash in the Pool of Siloam’ (this word means ‘Sent’). So, the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

8 His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, ‘Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?’ 9 Some claimed that he was.

Others said, ‘No, he only looks like him.’

But he himself insisted, ‘I am the man.’

10 ‘How then were your eyes opened?’ they asked.

11 He replied, ‘The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So, I went and washed, and then I could see.’

12 ‘Where is this man?’ they asked him.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. 15 Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. ‘He put mud on my eyes,’ the man replied, ‘and I washed, and now I see.’

16 Some of the Pharisees said, ‘This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.’

But others asked, ‘How can a sinner perform such signs?’ So, they were divided.

A Reflection

Jesus healed.

The gospels in several places speak of Jesus healing folk.

Jesus healed lepers (Mark 1 vv 40 to 45) ...

He healed people who couldn't walk (Matthew 9 vv 1 to 8) ...

He even healed the ear of the Roman Centurion which had been wounded by a tempestuous Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus.

And there are plenty of other healing episodes to add to that short list.

Jesus healed.

As the words of the beautiful John Bell hymn goes:

*To the lost Christ shows his face,
to the unloved he gives his embrace,
to those who cry in pain or disgrace
Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place. (Ch4 724)*

So yes – Jesus healed...!

That is not to say that Jesus style of healing was - in any sense – conventional though.

If we go to see our Dr (or in these days more likely speak to them over the phone!) we might expect to be dealt with in the more tried and tested methods of the modern consultation room where we share our concerns with someone who tries to work out the best course of action to follow. Perhaps a prescription for some medicine... or maybe a referral to another Dr who knows a bit more about our problem... or even just some good advice...

Using mud mixed with saliva, which is then basically splatted on to the affected part of our body, is not something that we might expect and yet, this is what Jesus does at verse 6 of our reading to the man who had been born blind.

Jesus' treatment was almost, if we think about it, the very opposite of what we would regard – in these days when we are so aware of how infection is spread! – of conventional and acceptable.

Simply put – NHS guidelines do not recommend that when you are trying to heal someone that you start splattering them with mud diluted with saliva!

It's a pretty rough image, isn't it...?

It makes us squirm... recoil...say a quiet "yuck" under our breath... pause to ponder to ask, "Did he really do that?"

William Barclay assures us, however, that in Jesus' day such seemingly - as he puts it - "*repulsive and unhygienic*" cures were not that uncommon. Barclay then goes on to explain that there are ancient tales of the saliva of famous leaders being seen to have curative qualities including (as Barclay continues to recount) a story involving a 1st century Emperor by the name of Vespasian who healed a blind man and a man who had a diseased hand by the application of his saliva!

Now, whether we choose to believe such stories is really up to us... and whether Jesus actually believed that trying to heal this blind man in this particular way was actually the correct way we

can at least say that Jesus did something here that drew the attention of others and certainly made the man who was healed feel as if something really special had happened to him.

It was, we might say, a bit of high drama...

Jesus could have healed him without the saliva and mud but we also have to remember that this blind man was also near the famed "*Pool of Siloam*" in Jerusalem. It is this which gives what Jesus did such added significance.

Here's what Barclay writes:

"The Pool of Siloam was the place where the conduit from the Virgin's Fountain issued in the city. It was an open air basin twenty by thirty feet. That is how the pool got its name. It was called Siloam, which, it was said, meant sent, because the water in it had been sent through the conduit into the city. Jesus sent this man to wash in this pool; and the man washed and saw".

Now, it probably isn't worth dwelling too much here on the actual way that Jesus heals this man...

It is an odd way, to be sure... and not a glamorous way... not by a long chalk.

On the other there is a powerful drama going on here.

The setting is Jerusalem and Jesus is near the famous pool of Siloam. Can there be any more dramatic backdrop than this?

We know, of course, that the drama in this story has already been building up even before Jesus meets and heals the blind man.

The drama begins even, as our story opens at verse 1, with Jesus simply "*walking along*".

It's quite a contrast to the verse before this at John chapter 8 and verse 59 where the crowd are about to start throwing rocks at Jesus for a claim that he seems to have made that he was God's chosen one.

Jesus has slipped away from the crowd, however, before they could do their worst and, later on (though we are not quite sure how much later on) Jesus is seen simply "*walking along*".

The heat of the previous encounter has passed and now a sort of calm has descended. Jesus is with his disciples and they spot a man who has been blind since birth.

As they "*walk along*" his disciples begin exploring some possible reasons as to why this man had been born blind.

They pursue the conventional logic of their day that - if you were ill - then something must have caused it.

Someone in this man's past – either himself as a baby or his parents – must have done something to cause him to now be blind.

For them it was as easy as 1 plus 1 equals 2... except that, as Jesus responds to them, he makes them seem as if they have just added 1 plus 1 and come up with 25!

They are, Jesus said to them, way off the mark here. This man's condition was not because someone did something wrong and they were frankly wrong to think that.

As many commentators have pointed out over the years the world (society... individuals... the media...) so often seem to play the blame game.

Take even the days we are living through...

Here we are sitting at home instead of inside our beautiful church building...

It's tempting to ask - who caused it all...?

Where did this all start?

Who is to blame?

Tempting but perhaps, at this stage, pointless... for we are where we are just as the blind man was where he was.

Jesus was sure, however, that if there was a purpose in what this man was experiencing – and a purpose and message in the challenges of our daily lives – then it was that through these experiences something of God's presence can be known.

Jesus isn't telling us here that we suffer simply so that God's love can be seen.

But we can, he says, see God's love even when we suffer.

There is a subtle distinction here...

The friends of Job in the Old Testament thought they had sussed out why Job was suffering...

It was 1 plus 1 equals - *"it must be your fault, Job!"* ... and then God rounds on them at the end of that wonderful book casting their theories to one side, powerfully telling them that there were things God was doing that they knew nothing about.

Jesus was as good as his word though.

If he says that good can be seen even when times are challenging then we can see the goodness of God entering into that man's life when Jesus tells him to go wash his face in the pool and he discovers that he can now see.

There were some who were there, as we discover at the end of our reading, who weren't so sure that what they had seen was something of God's goodness at work.

The logic of what they had seen Jesus do, on the Sabbath of all times, sent their minds racing to find ways of proving that Jesus was a conman... a charlatan who could not possibly be who he said he was.

Nothing surprising there then...!

Cynicism abounds and can distort our way of thinking. They don't understand what has happened here and that makes them want to try and write it off as the work of someone who could not be trusted.

Except they discover – as many who follow Jesus have discovered down the years – that the goodness of God has a strange way of bursting out of even the most difficult of challenges.

Which is sort of what we see happening today, isn't it?

As we social distance ourselves there are some who have to keep going...

They enter the hospital wards to help heal the sick...

They run the telephone hotlines to give good advice to those in need...

They pick up the phones to the lonely or do a little bit of shopping for them...

Goodness shines through the challenges... just as God's goodness was displayed that day Jesus healed a man using the strange combination of mud and saliva...!

Prayers for our World

Let us bring our world to God in prayer.

Loving God, today – even in the midst of challenges and questions – we rejoice that your goodness is not lost. We rejoice that your goodness has a wonderful way of bursting through our questions and queries with the mighty assurance that you are there and that your promise of goodness will always be fulfilled.

We thank you for that goodness and pray now for goodness to be felt and known amongst those who need you today.

We pray for those who, in these challenging days, give of their abilities to support others.

Especially we pray for those who work in the health service who are facing extra challenges at this time.

We pray too for all our emergency services which are working so hard to bring support to those who need it.

We pray for our leaders and decision makers who must decide on the best course of action to take.

And we pray for too for your church. Bind it together in love and goodness so that, even when your people cannot meet together in their usual place of worship, that your Holy Spirit would be bringing us together as one.

Loving and good God bless us this day with the goodness of your love in Jesus' name, Amen.

Closing Blessing

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,*

*Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*