

John chapter 9 – The story of the man born blind – Rev Paul Day

It can take a lot of courage to change one's mind. Not about trivial things – which TV programme to watch, what to have for tea tonight – but to change one's mind about something fundamental that you believe.

The first step to changing your mind about something is to be open to listen to new things, then to think about them and finally to make a decision about them. The trouble is all too often our minds are closed and we don't really listen to new ideas.

A few weeks ago I talked through the story of the conversion of St Paul – a classic example of someone who changed their mind. For Paul it was the first stage that was hard. He was brought up as a strict Pharisee. He knew what was right and what was wrong; he knew what the law said. He was someone who was closed to new ideas. It took the dramatic revelation on the Damascus Road to make him stop and think. The other stages were no doubt hard and painful too, but I suspect that first stage was the most difficult. He had to have his eyes opened to new ideas – and for him it happened as Ananias literally opened his eyes after he had been blinded by the light on the road.

The story in John chapter 9 is about blindness.

On its most basic level it is about the blindness of the man who was born blind.

But it starts with the blindness of the disciples as they struggled with the question of suffering and why it was that someone was blind.

And it ends with the blindness of the Pharisees and religious leaders as they refused to be open to what Jesus was saying and doing.

And each of these examples of blindness has something to say to us today.

Let's take the disciples first. The question they asked was about suffering. *"Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* To them it was quite simple. If someone suffered then either they or someone close to them had to bear the blame. It's a common view. Many people today hold the same view. We often hear questions like "What have I done to deserve this?" or "It's not fair". But Jesus is quite clear. The world is not that kind of slot machine world. Yes of course there are consequences to our actions, but not everything we see has a direct cause.

We look around our friends and families – maybe some have had Covid; perhaps, sadly, we know people who have died. But it's not because of anything they have done. Just as human beings fall short of God's perfection and are in need of being reconciled to God – in need of being recreated – a new creation as Paul calls it – so with the world around us. As we began to think about last Sunday, in the fullness of time and through the death of Jesus the world will be reconciled to God and made new – but that is not yet. We have to live with its imperfection and part of that is its seeming randomness.

Which brings us to the man born blind.

Jesus made some mud with his saliva, rubbed it on the man's eyes and told him to bathe them in the Pool of Siloam. He did as he was told, and amazingly he could see. The story could have ended there – just a story of a miraculous physical healing. But the Pharisees pursued the man. The more questions they asked, the more curious he became. Their blindness and their refusal to see new possibilities helped him to see things more clearly.

His physical healing developed into a slow realisation of who Jesus was and what his demand was upon his life culminating in the man recognising and believing in Jesus – the Son of Man – the Messiah. This was the beginning of something new for the man – his whole life had been given new meaning; he could see afresh in so many ways. When we come to Jesus for healing – and I hope you do pray for healing for yourself and for others – Jesus wants us to submit our whole selves to him so that we do not just receive healing, but wholeness. We become through him the people he wants us to be.

The blind man's attitude was in stark contrast to the Pharisees. As we have mentioned already when thinking about the apostle Paul, the Pharisees were scholars, they were experts in the law, they saw themselves as the custodians of what was right and what was wrong. And they saw Jesus as a threat to that. His claims and teaching and ideas threatened to upset everything they stood for, and threatened the relationship they had with the Roman authorities. They had much to lose.

Rather than actually listening to what Jesus was saying and considering it, they closed their minds to it because it challenged everything they held dear. Rather than actually listening to what the healed man was saying to them, they had simply written him off as a sinner because he had been born blind – and as such he could not be believed.

The story ends with them saying to Jesus "Surely we are not blind" and Jesus responds by saying it's not being blind that is the problem, it's refusing to acknowledge that you are blind that is the issue.

So three instances of blindness. The disciples who recognised their blindness but were open to learning more and so asked questions. They listened to what was being said in response and changed their views. The man who had been born blind but who wasn't aware of his deeper blindness. He may not have initiated the questions like the disciples, but he too was willing to learn and change as things were made more clear to him. Then there were the Pharisees who almost tied themselves in knots as they closed their eyes, their ears and minds to the truth of what Jesus was saying. They refused to admit to their blindness.

"I am the light of the world" says Jesus. "When I enter someone's life I shed my light upon it, I enable them to see things clearly, I give them new hope and a new future. All they have to do is recognise their need of the light and believe in me." The sadness is that so many prefer the familiarity of the darkness to the possibility and hope of light.