**Sunday 19th March 2023 Lent 4**

**John 9:1-41 Compassion v’s Legalism**

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Our reading for today from John’s Gospel captures a tension. It is a tension between an old or traditional way of viewing the life of faith (that of the Pharisee) and a more gracious acceptance of the frailty, hopes and dreams of people as expressed by Jesus in his concern for the well-being of the man born blind.

It is interesting just how unquestioning we can become in our own faith and cultural traditions. I remember when I was a very young child we were driving to Isla Bank to friends for lunch and my mother commenting about washing being hung on the line to dry on a Sunday. I asked what was wrong with hanging washing to dry on a nice windy, sunny Sunday. My mother told me that no lady did washing on a Sunday and hung it up for the public to see. Washing was to be done on a Monday.

Without being aware of it my mother was entrapped in a Southland cultural setting, which she did not question, about when it was Ok to hang the washing out for view and when it wasn’t. Mum, like generations before her, had been taught that Monday was wash day. The lady who hung out her washing on Sunday challenged that perspective and thus unknowingly drew comment from those who abided by the ‘tradition.”

Such was true of the disciples who had been around Jesus and witnessed him healing people.

At the time of Jesus it was believed that sin (our human propensity to foul things up) was the cause of illness. Illness was viewed as a punishment from God for sin. Now it may not have been the ill person’s personal sin – it could have been that one of your ancestors got offside with God and God took a generation or two before getting round to doing something about it.

Some rabbis in Israel taught that there was no death without sin and no suffering without iniquity. Some also speculated that a child could sin in the womb and that terrible punishments came on certain people because of their parents’ sin. The consequences of such sin became evident in life much later, or even generations later.

 Thus the disciples of Jesus raise the question with him about who it was that sinned that the man was born blind. Was it him or his parents? We wouldn’t even ask such a question today, would we?

Jesus rebukes his disciples, and I suspect rebukes many people in our world today, who say similar things. Jesus makes it clear that there is nothing that the blind man did, or others did before him, to justify our desire to imagine he “deserves” the burden he carries. That kind of thinking, Jesus suggests, is only an excuse to justify our own inaction in the face of suffering. And to prove the point Jesus immediately acts to relieve the blind man’s suffering.

It is interesting that Jesus sees a man who is unwell and requires his sight to be restored. The disciples see a blind man and wonder who it was that sinned to cause his blindness. We are close here to getting into the doctrine of Original sin.

Jesus appears not to be too worried about locating and labelling sinners – he knows that such a label could be applied to all of us. Rather, Jesus says that he is in the business of working in a way that “God’s works might be revealed in him.”

“I am the light of the world,” Jesus said, not “I am judge and jury come to condemn you all to a life of misery – an outcast from fellowship with others”

Jesus makes a puzzling statement by saying that the man’s blindness “happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” I had an uncle who was crippled from a child with the effects of polio. He could only walk with the use of crutches. I don’t think it would have been helpful for him to be told that he was afflicted so that the works of God might be displayed in him. What was Jesus on about?

At its root, Jesus is saying that every person, even those in a state of misery, has a purpose in God’s eyes-and indeed a wonderful purpose. Seen through the eyes of compassion, the blind man is a sign of God’s presence in the world- and a call to us to make that presence actively known, through our merciful outreach and compassion.

Now, Jesus’ critics – the Pharisees (those who believe that they have got God sussed) have no hesitancy in labelling people as sinners. When the blind man is presented to them they don’t rejoice in the fact that someone has been healed. Rather they attack Jesus and label him a sinner – one who doesn’t do God’s will – because he cured a man of blindness on the Sabbath. (Is this a little like the lady in Southland shouldn’t have hung out her washing to dry on the Sabbath?)

Some of them are thrown into consternation by the quandary over how a ‘sinner’ can actually perform a miraculous healing. But they don’t let such little problems shake their rock solid traditions which they know to be God’s will.

When the blind man is called to offer testimony he responds that he doesn’t know a great deal about sin: he is no theologian. All he can say is that he was once blind and now he can see. The Pharisees question the blind man asking him questions that he cannot possibly know the answer to. Where is this man? Who was he?

These are the questions of people schooled in law, as the Pharisees were. The man cannot possibly answer these question because he hasn’t seen Jesus and by the time he had received his sight by the pool of Siloam, Jesus is no where to be found. Jesus has moved on – he didn’t wait around to check that the man had received his sight.

Hearing the man’s answer that he doesn’t really know who cured him or what he looked like, the Pharisees move on to the attack and ask how he a man “born entirely in sin” has any business teaching them about God’s will. They drive him away – surely satisfied that they have carried out God’s will. The blind man has replied truthfully, and paid the consequence, for he has no idea what the man who cured him looks like.

What made the Pharisees furious was:

1. Jesus did something they couldn’t do.
2. Jesus healed the wrong people – sinners.
3. By healing on a Sunday Jesus was going against what they taught.

Rather than saying “Jesus is the Son of God – God with us. Let’s worship him.” The Pharisees responded by saying, “It’s not right for an uneducated person without a Medical Degree or a Theological Degree to be doing miraculous stuff like healing losing sinners”.

What does this say to modern people of faith like you and me?

I think it challenges us:

* To consider carefully our traditions and ask whether they are culturally conditioned or what Jesus would have us do as we live out our faith in him today.
* To be careful in our labelling of people who are different from us.
* To get in touch with what God is doing in our world in the circumstances of our day rather than what it was centuries ago when such things as The Westminster Confession and other Confessions were written. They were documents of their time – not ours.
* To consider what it may mean for us that Jesus shifted the disciples’ focus from the past, the cause of the man’s suffering, to the future – how God displays power and compassion in the midst of suffering today.
* To consider what it may mean for us to provide compassionate outreach for others today including those whom society has, in general, written off because their afflictions are viewed as being a consequence of their own folly.
* To consider that there may be an innocence in admitting that we are too blind to pass judgement on others. We don’t have to have an opinion on everything, especially when the question is who is to blame. It’s enough for us to say, “I don’t know who is to blame, I’m just here to help.”

Finally, we cannot predict who will be a minister of Christ’s compassion in our lives. Christ’s power can be manifest in the most unlikely of places. We must approach every person as if Christ is acting on us, through them, and them through us.

To God be the glory. Amen