

## The Man born Blind – Controversy and Consolation

The Man born Blind from John 9 is a classic example of 'miracle-conflict' in the Fourth Gospel which illustrates the kind of group tensions behind the text. All the gospels include healings of the blind which was one of the criteria for the coming of messianic age. John makes it explicit here that the man was blind from birth which in the context of the strong 'darkness-light' duality which is a hallmark of the text means that he has always been in the shadows of THE DEAD ZONE. Straight away, the classic understanding that someone must have sinned for this situation to arise is offered by his disciples. The answer to this conundrum is not found by looking for faults but for glory, not through focus on the darkness of blindness, but through focus on the light of the world (9:1-5).

Jesus then conducts a *theandric* act – a 'God-human' action whereby spittle, mud, water, as well as the divinely voiced command, are all constituent parts of the miracle. Sacramental theology rests on the notion of 'theandric acts' but for now it is enough to note that just as Jesus was 'sent' by the Father, the blind man too is 'sent.' And in what can be identified as an allusion to baptism through the use of water, the one who was 'sent' returns healed to the general consternation of those who knew him. Now one of the features of John's gospel is that he explicitly includes the argument of the 'opposition' – it is an extended courtroom drama in which the hearer (you) are expected to give the (correct) verdict! There is a genuine dilemma here for the Pharisees who would be naturally suspicious because the miracle was so spectacular. Moreover, that a holy person would 'work' on the Sabbath and 'make clay' in the manner that might recall the lot of the Hebrew slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt is even more unsettling (9:6-12).

**Read the text verses 1-12.** Do we share the prejudice that the sick are to blame for their ills? I (Note that scapegoating has in the past been a feature of epidemics – as though blaming some group makes us feel better).  
In terms of our own experience of illness, how would the blind man feel in the darkness of his uncertainty? Have we ever been graced by someone whom we never met nor knew? Or enabled by strangers or by strange instructions?

Keeping up the legal tone, the Pharisees look for reliable testimony and his parents are sought out. At this point we see classic evidence of the *sitz im leben* 'lived context' of John (9:13-17). The parents are afraid of 'the Jews' lest they be 'put out of the synagogue.' (9:18-23). By this stage the hostilities are more marked. The blind man is now becoming a *witness* to Jesus even though he doesn't know who Jesus is. He becomes a bit 'sassy' with the religious authorities who cite Moses in support. He refuses to back down and he is 'cast out' (9:24-34).

**Read the text verses 18-34.** Is it hard to change the perceptions other people may have of you?  
Have we had experience of rejection or family persecution through no fault of our own?

In an unusual turn but one entirely consonant with a 'Good Shepherd,' Jesus is the one who goes in search of the one who has been cast out. The man can see, but he still does not know who Jesus is. This gradual 'coming to true sight' is made complete as he believes and then worships him. The recognition phases of the man born blind are contrasted with the perspectives of the Pharisees who are portrayed as not only blind, but becoming more obstinate and more guilty. A story that begins with the blind man being accused of having sinned ends with the supposedly sighted and holy religious experts being the blind and guilty ones (9:35-41).

**Read the text verses 35-41.** What do you think of the idea that Jesus is searching for us as the Good Shepherd?  
What prevents us being a witness to Christ's truth?

Withal, it does not take too imaginative a leap to understand the power of this story for hearers likewise cast out of synagogues, accused of being irreligious on the authority of Moses for believing in the uniqueness of Jesus. Religious convictions, religious divisions and religious guilt all run deep. By presenting the strong tradition of Jesus' healing of the blind man in the context of this religious disagreement, John can use the story to encourage community members to identify with the blind man who comes to see clearly, who is braver than his parents, who is unafraid of rejection. Favourite Gospel themes collide and reach their zenith here, light v dark, witness v rejection, healing v resentment, solace v sabbath - all oppositions which yield the new reality, a man born again, who recognizes in Jesus the face of God and worships him.

LIKE THE BLIND MAN, LET CHRIST CLEANSE OUR EYES THAT WE MIGHT WITNESS TO HIM

## John 9

### A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

### The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

### The Casting out from the Synagogue

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

### Spiritual Blindness

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.'