

March 2, 2008

With whom do you find yourself most identifying in the gospel story we've just heard read? There are a number of possible candidates for such personal resonance: the disciples, the Pharisees, the healed man, his parents, the surprised onlookers, perhaps even Jesus himself. I dare to suggest that perhaps the character with whom we most easily and immediately identify is the man born blind. We don't have to share his particular problem to find him our co-traveller in life. As do many of us, he suffers from things quite beyond his control, or if it is not us then it will be someone dear to us. We know something of the difficulty he has experienced, and so we have longed with him for release from that suffering. Identifying in this way with him, we then want to defend him against the horrific laying of blame upon him or his parents for his condition.

And yet, there is an important sense in which we cannot identify with him, and that is in the fact that he receives healing of the that which ails him. Whereas we all know suffering and the desire to have it lifted, few of us – if any – have known this kind of release. "I once was blind but now I see" is something we've only ever really declared *metaphorically*. If even we *can*, we can only "believe" in miracles of this type; they are not something we have *known*. And so we can only identify with the healed man up to the point of his healing; thereafter, our nearest identity in the story becomes the Pharisees.

Now we should note that, at least on the surface, there are two things going on for the Pharisees. The first is the report of the miracle, and the second is the fact that this has taken place on the Sabbath – the day of rest. The miracle itself causes a problem for them for obvious reasons, and yet their concern would have been quite different from concerns we might have. The Pharisees knew as well as we do that blind people don't just start seeing again. And yet miracles were not the same *kind* of impossibility in their understanding of the world, as they are in ours. The difference between their approach to such miracles and ours today is that they had a clear sense of what such an event would *mean*, whereas we do not. If today a person born blind were suddenly to see again, whether by the actions of another person, or such a thing had "simply happened", it would not be clear to us what the event *meant*. That is, it would not be clear what *we* should *do* if another person were to be healed in this way. Certainly there would be

much fuss if it could be proven that such a healing had taken place, but it would be largely confused and directionless. It would make great copy and engaging television but, like most copy and television, this interest wouldn't be able to move us very far. We would merely have another amazing story for whatever today's equivalent of *Ripley's Believe it or Not* might be – probably our tabloid current affairs programs. For us, such miracles are dumb; for the Pharisees, however, such a healing had clear significance and spoke volumes: such a thing indicated the presence of the God of Israel in or through the healer.

This might seem obvious to believers even today, but there arose then a problem we imagine we've already dealt with – the fact that the healing has taken place on the Sabbath, the day of rest commanded of the people of Israel since the days of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. This constitutes a contradictory pointer to Jesus. On the one hand the witness accounts seem to make it incontrovertible that he has done what only one with God on his side could do; on the other hand he also seems to have broken God's law by "working" on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath issue seems an odd one to us today, for we have almost totally done away with the idea of a day of rest. Of all the commandments painted so beautifully on our walls here, this fourth commandment is one we've given little heed. We are quite sure the other 9 should be taken more or less literally – don't lie, or steal, or run off after other gods, the Sabbath one is surely "metaphorical", or a guideline rather than a commandment. We've also had the benefit of hearing the stories of controversy over the Sabbath miracles of Jesus for the whole of our Christian lives, and so those controversies seem quite beneath us.

For the Pharisees the problem is not simply a moral one about what one can and cannot do on a commanded day of rest. It's a starkly theological question: can God as healer break the commandment of God as law-giver? This is how it appears to the Pharisee, and yet Jesus shifts the question. In fact the problem is not so much the Sabbath commandment *per se* but what came to be made of it by the religious teachers of his time. Of course, the possibility of such corruption cannot be admitted by them. It is the fate of all of our great ones that they have followers who declare their own actions to be in accordance with

their leader, and in doing so often miss the point entirely. And so we hear from the Pharisees, "We are Moses' disciples... We know that God has spoken to Moses", they declare, "but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from".

But in so doing they, and we in their shoes, declare blindness to the gift of God, for God's gift of the Sabbath rest has become the burden of commandment to be fulfilled. We have an extraordinary capacity to turn the gifts of God into burdens, a capacity which manifests itself when protests are raised that a blind man might be assisted to see again on the day of rest. In the mind of the Pharisees the Sabbath has become something to be defended, rather than being something which would defend us – against ourselves. And so a healing work on this day is thought to contradict what the Sabbath stands for. To paraphrase from elsewhere in Jesus' teaching, the Sabbath has been reduced to something which human beings serve, rather than being the gift and service God made it to be.

In our age we've done the same thing, although in fact by doing exactly the opposite of what the Pharisees did. For us it is a burden to stop work in such a way as the Sabbath would seem to require. Imagine what it would take in our society for all but essential services to wind down for a day a week. I doubt we could even conceive of it. It is extraordinarily difficult to imagine such a thing is even in our own lives. What would have to take place for us to set aside a free day a week – no shopping or necessary phone calls or emails, no working bees or meetings or final preparations, being available to the wider world only through rest and play and fellowship? It ought to be more curious to us today than it actually is, that we are *commanded* to a day of rest. What a contrast this is to the expectation of those of us who are busy(!) *giving ourselves* "permission" to take breaks from heavy work schedules or other commitments.

Whatever such Sabbath observance might mean for us personally and for our society, I've found myself lately wondering what it might mean for the church. I suspect that the difference between what will save us and what will see us go the way of the dodo is usually only very small. (Jesus' thoughts were never very far from the Pharisees'...). We have rather a stronger sense of the work to be done in the church than the gift which is given. If the loss of the gift of the Sabbath characterises the kind of shift which has taken place in even our faith communities, then might not regaining that gift constitute a renewing movement among us? We should not underestimate how difficult this would be; for us to imagine that it might be worth undertaking would require the kind of shift which would have

to take place were a blind man suddenly to be able to see again.

In his freedom to "do the works of the one who sent him", Jesus identifies himself as the one who turns the gifts of God from the burdens we make of them back into gifts again. Jesus makes what God has given a blessing instead of a curse. In him God's law makes sense, and sets us free. In him other people – the intention of the law – are not a burden but the place where God might be found. In him, we might say in fear and trembling, even what is wrong with us might become something in which God's works might be revealed. "I came into this world for judgment", Jesus says, "so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

The work of Jesus is to make a curse the possibility of a blessing, and to reveal many apparent blessings as being rather less so than we might have imagined.

To pick up the image of Jesus as the light of the world, the work of Jesus is to bring the full spectrum to bear on what we've been used to seeing in light which is too cool or too warm, and so which doesn't reveal to us the true colours of the world around us.

It is eyes to see these true colours we need, if we are to know what is the true blessing and what truly is a curse.

By the grace of God, may his people pray for such eyes, and such a light, and give him the glory for the blessings then discovered. Amen.