LIGHT, TRUTH AND ACTION

Sermon preached on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 19 March 2023 at Christ's Church Cathedral, Hamilton, Ontario, by Bishop Terry Brown, Texts: Ephesians 5: 8-14 and John 9: 1-41.

Two weeks ago: Jesus and Nicodemus; Last week: Jesus and the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well; this morning, Jesus and the unnamed "man born blind." Three stories of Jesus's one-on-one encounters with three very different people. The stories are different, yet also alike. All three stories have at least one common theme: the progressive revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Nicodemus is hesitant but tradition tells us that he eventually became a follower of Jesus. The Samaritan woman is amazed but confused, asking, "Could this be the Messiah?", though her testimony eventually leads others to recognize Jesus as the Saviour. But this morning's "man born blind," healed by Jesus, despite being ostracized by the religious leaders of the day, unambiguously recognizes Jesus, exclaiming, "Lord, I believe!" and worships him.

If there were ever a Gospel narrative that might be called a bit of a "shaggy dog" story, it is this one. That is very clear from our dramatic reading of it this morning. There is a dramatic reversal. The Pharisees, the keepers of the Law, who have sight, begin by claiming to see the truth, yet by the end of the story they are clearly blind, not just spiritually blind but blind to the reality that the blind man was healed. The "man born blind" cannot see at all at the beginning of the story, either physically or spiritually. But by the end of the story he sees, both physically and spiritually, and proclaims Jesus as the Messiah. Throughout the story are the Pharisees, bouncing from one place to another in their denials and anger; there is the healed man, a bit confused, amazed, knowing that he can now see, but everyone unhappy about it rather than being amazed and joyful; there are his parents, also amazed, but blamed and caught in the crossfire; and there is Jesus, quietly in the background, his work of healing accomplished.

One can go many directions with this story, but I want to concentrate on just one point, that suggested by the first verse of the passage. "As [Jesus] went 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?'"

This question reflects a mindset that we may think we no longer have – I shall come back to that in a moment – that sickness and undeserved suffering are the result of sin, and not simply natural phenomena, such as a disease. It is still a common mindset in many cultures. Where I worked in the South Pacific it was extremely common. I often had to deal with questions like, "Who sinned that Joe, a strong young person, is suddenly ill and near death? What did he do wrong? What did his parents do wrong? Who poisoned him?" (The belief that there must always be sin behind illness can lead to a belief in sorcery and witchcraft, with many false accusations, another problem.) The question often came up in difficult childbirths, where the woman was blamed, perhaps because of some unconfessed sexual sin, and urged to confess it, to speed along the delivery. (Often there is misogyny behind such blame.) So, Jesus's answer, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God

might be displayed in him" is immensely important. In other words, do not blame the victim, rather, facilitate the healing of the victim. Let God work.

We have many contemporary versions of the disciples' question, "Who sinned?" Many of our popular psychosomatic notions about disease and marginality have an underlying theme of blame attached to them, either of the person who is sick or someone close to them. Why does George stutter? His father was probably too harsh with him and frightened him when he was a child. Why does Mary have cancer? She is depressed all the time and we know that depressed people are prone to develop cancer. Why is Fred gay? It must have been his mother coddling him too much. Why is Susan schizophrenic? It must have something to do with her parents' dysfunctional marriage. And so on. The American literary critic, Susan Sontag, wrote a classic study of this blame game in a 1978 book entitled *Illness as Metaphor*. Ill with cancer herself, she argued that illness is *not* a metaphor, a symbol for something else, but simply a phenomenon to be dealt with through healing. She points out that in the 19th century, tuberculosis (commonly called "consumption") was regarded was the product of melancholy, where we now know that it can be healed by a strong dose of antibiotics.

Another way of putting it is to say that Jesus is rejecting sin as a human condition, whatever its causality. Sin as a condition is the attitude of the Pharisees in the story. When the blind man, healed, tries to tell them how Jesus has healed him, they declare, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture to us!" I am reminded of the response of some Christians to the witness of a lesbian, gay or trans couple that what they experience is genuine love, with the words, "no matter what you experience, it is sin." Sin is not the condition, but the failure to act upon it, or use it, or develop it, with Divine Love.

None of this is to deny that sin exists and has a negative effect on our lives, even on our health. Pollution produces unhealthy air and unsafe products, that contribute to disease, including cancer. Wrong (indeed, sinful) government priorities result in poor health care and underpaid nurses and nurse aides. Intergenerational trauma is real, including that rooted in the colonialism of Indigenous peoples, and produces vulnerable and broken people. But they and their forebearers are not the ones who sinned. Likewise, we sometimes blame the poor for their poverty, rather than looking at our own responsibility for it. It is rather like the government saying to those in a health crisis, "Well, you just shouldn't get sick so much. It's your fault." Blame the victim.

Of course, this blame is often internalized by the sick or marginalized person. The blind man in the story as so internalized the negative views about him that he has become a beggar, and has little self-esteem or hope. But, as with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus surprises him, chooses him, and gives unexpected joy with healing, both physical and spiritual.

The second half of Jesus's response, "this happened that the works of God might be displayed" is the key to moving forward. Whatever the situation of brokenness or marginality – illness, depression, grief, social collapse, homelessness, poverty, traumatic memories, loneliness, social rejection – we are called we work with Divine Love on the situation, praying

that God's gracious healing may be made manifest. We commit the situation to prayer – even prayer for those who have damaged or injured us – and move forward with action. We think and discuss deeply about the situation, dismissing empty platitudes of blame, and move forward in love guided by the Holy Spirit. That is what St. Paul describes in the passage from Ephesians this morning.

In Lent, of course, we are encouraged to think about where we have been not victims, but part of the problem. The bishop who ordained me was very fond of the question, "Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?" (How many of you have heard that question before?) I expect we are all a little bit of both. Sometimes being part of the solution means becoming more involved, perhaps with something we have avoided. Sometimes being part of the solution means getting out of the way so that others can do the work better than us. Jesus did not approach the man born blind adding more problems to his life; rather he produced a solution, a transformative healing. May the Holy Spirit give us the gift to solve problems, not make more problems.

All this movement forward to enlightenment is summed up in the closing verses of the Gospel. Jesus explains, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." That is, where we are blind, we are called to a light that will see the truth, speak the truth, and act the truth. As the blind man in the Gospel now sees, we too are called to clarity of vision and action. That requires a recognition of our blindness, another Lenten task. So a Lenten question to reflect upon this week: "Where am I blind? Where do I not understand something and am confused? Where is my blindness harming another? Where am I putting an unnecessary burden on another through misplaced blame? How can I move forward to clarity and light and loving action?

Jesus transformed the lives of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the "man born blind." I am sure that he has already transformed ours; but that transformation is never complete. And so, we end with a simple Lenten prayer: GOD, help us to see our sins as you see them, that we may truly repent, be forgiven and, indeed, move forward in action. Amen.