

## Thoughts for the Day 11<sup>th</sup> June 2020 {Feast of St Barnabas}.

Well, here we are with another week of lockdown under our belt and the progress back towards a form of “normality” is real but very slow. If we could recall back at the start of all this, the “experts” said that diseases like this arrive and expand quickly, but only disappear slowly. Of all the social behaviours this should be teaching us, tolerance and patience are two vital ones but not much talked about.

In the New Testament reading today in John 9: 24-38, we have a situation described where Jesus has restored sight to a man born blind. What we need to first understand is that in the social structure in Jesus’s time there were effectively three classes in the Hebrews. The Sadducees were the ruling elite, the Pharisees were a sect that paid minute attention to obeying every last full stop and comma of the ten commandments and the 613 other laws and ordinances that the Israelites had subsequently compiled in order to regulate everyday life as the commandments were considered almost too basic. The Pharisees ensured their position and self-view, by being the most educated in the Mosaic Laws, paying the most – and being seen to do that – in terms of their ability to offer all and the best sacrifices at the temple etc.

So to be a Pharisee must have both education and money. They looked down on everyone else who did not meet their rigorous and unbending life and practices. These were the “Sinners”.

Sinners included: the poor, the sick, Samaritans, Gentiles, all aliens, tradespeople, tax-collectors, Soldiers, doctors, butchers, those who were the equivalent of funeral directors, Prostitutes, criminals and slaves. Many of these were “sinners” because they had not the education or money to follow the Law rigorously as the Pharisees did, others because by nature of their work they handled “unclean” things and were thus themselves “Unclean” – Soldiers, Doctors, butchers funeral directors etc. and others because personal choice or force of circumstance meant that they did not follow the Law precisely. While they would not do violence to anyone, they would engage soldiers to do it on their behalf. A selective interpretation of the Law... Nonetheless, in their minds, the world of the Pharisees was ultra “Black and White” everything had its place and the social order was as it should be !! So the Pharisees only mixed with the “Sinners” when there was no alternative.

However, in restoring sight to the blind man Jesus made the point that neither the man’s parents nor he himself were sinners, but he’d been born blind “so that Gods works could be revealed in him.” In this case it would have puzzled the Pharisees because quite patently the man was sick and was poor and so was, by definition, a sinner.

But Jesus wasn’t using the term in the same precise way as the Pharisees but in the sense that a sinner would be someone who knowingly did wrong in the eyes of God and was

unrepentant about it. So their lifestyle or social status might be irrelevant to their sinning or might be a by-product of it.

Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to understand that the world wasn't made to fit their interpretation of the Laws and that to fully follow Gods Laws you should "Love thy Neighbour" – which they only did with major caveats.

The man whose sight was restored was naturally overjoyed and yet must have been frustrated that folk who'd known him for many years were so sceptical of his miraculous change that they even doubted if he'd ever in fact been blind!

He was taken to the Pharisees who were very troubled by the events. They asked him what did Jesus do and say, they then asked who he thought Jesus was, to which he replied "a Prophet" since to a Jew , only a Prophet could do miracles. Recognise that for all of his life he'd never lived far from the spot that Jesus found him. He'd heard of this new "Rabbi" but certainly wasn't a disciple – his situation didn't enable that and being a blind beggar was simply a common, everyday sight in the world and was socially unremarkable and they became almost invisible.

So in addition to this new "Rabbi" not being a Pharisee, he freely mixed with "Sinners" - in fact focused his teaching on them - and now, to cap it all, had allegedly performed a miracle on one !!

This didn't sit with the Pharisees' view of the scriptures and so in order to discredit the man as being a responsible adult, they then challenged the mans parents as to whether he was old enough to speak for himself - which he was - so that didn't work either.

The Pharisees then called the man back a second time to interrogate him and started by saying that Jesus was a sinner to which the man replied "I do not know if he is a sinner but I do know that I was blind and now I see". They then asked the same questions all over again, to which the man said "You've asked this already and haven't listened, Why are you asking again? Do you want to become Disciples?" Not the most tactful of replies but no doubt borne out of frustration.

The Pharisees clearly affronted then say "You are his disciple but we are disciples of Moses and we know that God spoke to Moses. But we don't know where this man came from!" To which the formerly blind man replies " Here is the astonishing thing ! you do not know where he comes from but 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 one who was born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.!"

The Pharisees, who prided themselves on their scrupulous and precise obedience of the Commandments and the other 613 laws and ordinances of their faith could not reconcile that here was an itinerant Rabbi, a rural hick in their eyes, who yet seemed to have done a miracle that could only have happened with the power of God. In their eyes only Prophets or the awaited Messiah could do that and they weren't about to accept Jesus as either.

What they had lost sight of was that Gods Laws were about love and respect for others, not who made offerings and when and how etc. Their very rigidity was making them blind to the essential truths of the Law. And they were unrepentant about how they were – they couldn't see anything wrong with it even though the examples were all around them.

So toward the end of the passage we come to the “punch line” as it were. Some of the Pharisees were listening to the conversation between the man and Jesus as Jesus had sought him out having heard he'd been questioned twice, and 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.” The Pharisees said” Surely, we are not blind are we?” And Jesus replies “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “we see”, your sin remains.”

Thus those who held themselves publicly on a pinnacle of piety and treated all those “below” them as sinners , were forced to confront the fact that the man who had been healed by God was a sinner in their books – and they couldn't (and wouldn't have tried) to heal him.

They in fact had even worse “Spiritual Blindness” than the man who had physical blindness from birth but still trusted in Jesus even though at the start he couldn't see him physically..

Now you may argue that Christians today are not at risk of being “Spiritually Blind”, but can we be so sure? From the work done by the Apostles and the first disciples like Barnabas who brought Christianity to the wider Gentile world , over the last two millennia the Church in all it's forms has struggled with making sure it is correctly following Christ's teaching. There have been revisions, interpretations, and great theological discourses on the content of the Bible and “the Meaning” of Christianity as Christ taught it.

We have by now hopefully endured the peak of the Covid19 pandemic, and this has meant changing the way we do things on many levels. How we behave , how we look after each other, how we translate this into our lifestyle – both at a personal and at society level . It would be too easy to not change the way things had been, but then we wouldn't have learned anything. Through this terrible disease we have been made to look inwardly and while there have appeared many examples, of selfless behaviour, those were a re-emergence of values we already held but perhaps, like the Pharisees, only applied when convenient. We need to ensure that we don't revert and dismiss the good that has arisen from these past months as being only somehow “Conditional to the times”. God doesn't

work like that. He's given us a chance to reflect on how we have become. We were sinners – the question is now do we change and thus repent?

or do we revert and establish ourselves as sinners again just like the Pharisees in their own way.

As a final thought, today is also the celebration of St Barnabas in the church calendar, an early disciple who was a Cypriot Jew but travelled extensively with Paul (Saul of Tarsus) out of Antioch taking the Good News message to the Gentiles and setting up the first churches. It was in Cyprus that the term "Christians" was first used. These early disciples were doing for the "Gentile" world as well as for the Jews of their time, what Jesus had tried to do for the Pharisees. Through their preaching, getting these people to see that following the Good News teaching of Jesus was not an exclusive, divisive way of living but embraced everyone, equally without requiring money, position, power, or force of arms. Just love and respect.

To check on our "Spiritual Vision" we still need to ask ourselves if we can "see the wood of the Cross for the trees"? Or are we modern Pharisees? How would we have responded to Barnabas?

I will close with the words of that lovely old hymn "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" and leave you to search yourselves on our individual blindness as I doubt many have 20/20 vision.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
    Forgive our foolish ways!  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,  
    In purer lives Thy service find,  
    In deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard  
    Beside the Syrian sea  
The gracious calling of the Lord,  
Let us, like them, without a word  
    Rise up and follow Thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!  
O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee  
The silence of eternity  
Interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all  
Our words and works that drown  
The tender whisper of Thy call,  
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall  
As fell Thy manna down.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of Thy peace.

<https://youtu.be/Bk7SX3r59sc>