

# North Kildonan United Church

19<sup>th</sup> March 2023 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5: 8-14

John 9: 1-41

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*Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of your presence open the mind of God to us, that in your light we may see light, and in your strength be strong.*

For these last three Sundays of Lent, that is last Sunday, today and next Sunday, the devisers of the Lectionary have carved off substantial slabs of John's gospel for us to ponder and to chew upon. Last Sunday was John's account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Today we hear of the healing of the blind man and next Sunday, in 45 verses, John will tell us of Mary and Martha and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. With that reading, the Sundays in Lent conclude.

Today's gospel begins with a question that is still asked to this day, though perhaps phrased slightly differently. The heart of the question is the basically this: what is the cause behind an ailment or an infirmity. In Jesus's day it's couched in terms of sin. What horrible offence, or sin, was committed which led to a person being blind from birth? We don't really receive a complete answer to the question, which is perhaps understandable, considering how profound and disturbing and challenging is the question of suffering. In today's reading, the healing of the blind man provides a base for the exploration of themes of light and darkness, spiritual sight and blindness, and how Jesus is understood within those themes.

So, we have Jesus restoring sight to a blind man, an act of kindness and mercy that is quickly misunderstood. The neighbours question what has happened. The disciples ask the awkward and somewhat cruel question about who sinned, a question Jesus shuts down. The Pharisees reject this miracle because it wasn't done according to their rules and regulations. And instead of rejoicing with the man and his parents, the Pharisees interrogate the family.

Throughout today's reading we have this interplay between sight and blindness which has nothing really to do with the physical ability to see. Rather, it is the self-imposed blindness that gets in the way; it is the spiritual inability of the characters in this chapter to truly see what has happened, and how this miracle has occurred.

The neighbours have only known this man as someone born blind, and they can't imagine seeing him as any different. They just can't believe he's no longer blind.

The Pharisees can't see the miracle because they are blinded by their rigid interpretation of the law. All they could see is that Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, thus breaking the Sabbath law, thus proving that Jesus is a sinner. They are so rule bound that they cannot see, these men of God, the power of God at work in their midst.

The parents, caught between love of their son and fear of the Pharisees, are unable to grasp this new thing God is doing, a thing not bound by the interpretations of the Law by the Pharisees. Neighbours, Pharisees, parents-they can see that Jesus has restored eyesight but they don't see the act for what it truly is. They are all blind, in one way or another, to Jesus who is the light of the world.

It is only the healed man who can see Jesus for who he is, the Son of Man who has come to bring sight and light to this world. In the gospel writer's perspective, those who can see become blind; those who are blind will see. John's gospel uses this sign of power and healing to continue to unfold the great theme of the contrast between light and darkness, upending our false assumptions along the way.

They say that seeing is believing. Yet when Jesus clearly demonstrates the compassionate power of God, we look for reasons not to believe. The gospel writer invites us to see ourselves in the disciples, neighbours, Pharisees and parents. We are those who prefer not to see what is right in front of our noses, who would prefer to live in the darkness we know rather than open our eyes to blinding, brilliant light of God's presence in our midst. Still, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

Think of the darkness, if you will. In the darkness, we have the luxury of holding conversations about the sins and sufferings of others without acknowledging our own sins and shortcomings. In the darkness, we are free to pretend that we don't see the sufferings of those around us, that we are not called to respond with love and healing. Jesus, however, has not come to encourage us to remain in the dark.

There are indeed times when our eyes are opened to truly see what we have been ignoring or rejecting. A vivid example of that was shown in the movie Amazing Grace, which was released back in 2006.

It's the story of the work done by many to end the slave trade throughout the British Empire. William Wilberforce, a British Member of Parliament, played a strong role in shifting public opinion away from slavery. In the movie there is a scene where a boatload of polite ladies and gentlemen are hosted on a pleasant journey down the Thames. A chamber orchestra plays music as these society folk indulge in their fine treats and quality beverages. It's a blissful, carefree, sunny afternoon.

And then their boat gets close to a large ship docked at harbour. The fragrance wafting from this ship is anything but pleasant, and scented handkerchiefs are pressed into use to block the stench.

Wilberforce appears on the slave ship and addresses the boaters. He describes the unimaginable conditions slaves endured in transport from Africa, with absolutely no access to hygiene or decent food or water. He calls the polite society boaters to lower their handkerchiefs and experience just a whiff of the horror which is the human slave

trade. Faced with this inhumanity, with their wilful blindness of how they profited from slave labour, many eyes were opened, and good Christian folk were faced with the absolute evil of slavery and challenged to do something about it.

It should be noted that after slavery was abolished within the British Empire in the early 1800s, the Royal Navy spent the rest of the century sailing the seas in search of slave ships of other nations, boarding those boats and setting free the slaves found there. The cost in manpower and the use of naval vessels, as well as in the deaths of many British sailors, was a considerable expense, but also a tremendously merciful act, a fact conveniently forgotten in these days.

John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace*, is also a key character in this movie. Newton was born in 1725 and died in 1807. Newton was nurtured by a Christian mother who taught him the Bible at an early age, but she died when he was 7. At age 11 he went on his first of six sea-voyages.

Newton lost his first job because of "unsettled behaviour and impatience of restraint", a pattern that would persist for years. He spent his later teen years at sea before he was press-ganged into the navy. He rebelled against the discipline of the Royal Navy and deserted. He was caught, put in iron and flogged. He eventually convinced his superiors to discharge him to a slave ship. He remained arrogant and insubordinate, and he lived with moral abandon. As he later wrote: "I sinned with a high hand and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others."

He took up employment with a slave-trader but that didn't turn out so well and he was forced to beg for food to allay his hunger.

In 1747 he was transferred to the service of the captain of the *Greyhound*, a Liverpool ship. On its homeward journey, the ship was overtaken by an enormous storm. Newton had been reading Thomas a Kempis's The Imitation of Christ and was struck by a line about the "uncertain continuance of life." He also recalled the passage in Proverbs: "Because I have called and ye have refused....I also will laugh at your calamity." He converted during the storm, though he admitted later: "I cannot consider myself to be a believer, in the full sense of the word."

Newton then served as a mate and later as captain of a number of slave ships, hoping as a Christian to restrain the worst excesses of the slave trade, "promoting the life of God in the soul" of both his crew and his African cargo.

After leaving the sea for an office job in 1755, Newton held Bible studies in his Liverpool home. Influenced by John and Charles Wesley and by George Whitefield, he became increasingly disgusted with the slave trade and his role in it. He quit, was ordained into the Anglican ministry, and in 1764 took a parish in Olney, in Buckinghamshire.

Three years later, the poet William Cowper moved to Olney. In 1769, Newton

began a Thursday evening prayer service. For almost every week's service, he wrote a hymn to be sung to a familiar tune. Newton challenged Cowper to also write hymns, which he did. Newton later combined his 280 hymns with Cowper's 68 hymns into a volume entitled "Olney Hymns". Among Newton's hymns, besides *Amazing Grace*, are *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken*, *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds*, and *O For a Closer Walk with God*. Cowper's hymns are less well known, but our Red Hymn book contained a few, including *Jesus, Where'er Thy People Meet* and *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*. That last hymn had a curious verse within it.

*"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face."*

In 1787 Newton wrote Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade to help William Wilberforce's campaign to end the practice – "*a business at which my heart now shudders*," he wrote. Recollection of that chapter in his life never left him, and in his old age, when it was suggested that the increasingly feeble Newton retire, he replied "*I cannot stop. What? Shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak?*"

In 2007 the pilgrimage tour I was on visited Newton's church in Olney and we conducted a service there, singing Newton's hymns, including *Amazing Grace*, and seeing, off in a corner of the church, the pulpit from which Newton preached for all his years there.

From the gospel account, the man born blind suddenly received his sight. For most of us, I suspect it is an ongoing process to come to see the world as Christ sees it, to be agents of love and mercy and grace, and to embrace the full realization that Christ indeed is the Light of the World.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.*

Now to him who is able through the power which is at work among us to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine,  
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
from generation to generation for evermore! Amen.