

Jesus the light of the world

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

How do we see the world? Through our eyes! ...

but sometimes we don't see things even though they're right in front of us ...

it's like we're blind to them – whether it's certain people or beauty – we just don't see ... like the shy quiet neighbour who just goes about their business.

On the other hand we can become invisible to others and our amazing life experience and wisdom is ignored ... because we're old

Jesus was very good at noticing people, especially the ones other people walked by without seeing. In today's Bible story, Jesus sees a man who has been blind since birth – never able to see anything. He probably had to beg for food. Jesus rubbed some mud on his eyes and prayed that God would restore his sight. After the man washed his eyes, he could see!

But as we'll hear shortly, this got Jesus into BIG trouble because he did it on a Sunday when you weren't supposed to do any work.

Let's hear how the story goes ...

Read: [1 Samuel 16:1–13](#) [John 9:1–41](#)

Most of us would agree that blindness is a difficult and challenging condition. The World Health Organisation estimates that there are roughly 40 million blind people in the world today with a further 250 million with moderate to severe visual impairment. This is often caused by cataracts but also by uncorrected vision problems like astigmatism. Over 80% of these conditions are curable, and mostly affect people living in developing countries. Groups like [Christian Blind Mission](#), the [Fred Hollows Foundation](#) and the [Vanuatu Prevention of Blindness Project](#) (which was supported by the Uniting Church for many years) are focused on preventing blindness as well as restoring sight to as many people as possible.

I have a personal interest in helping such groups because I suffer from a degenerative

eye condition called **glaucoma** where high pressure within the eye gradually kills off the retina. It's a painless disease that people only become aware of as their vision darkens and is eventually lost completely. I put the discovery of my glaucoma down to God's grace – I was visiting the Royal Show one year with my youngest son Jesse who saw a community health caravan and wanted to have his eyes tested. His eyes were perfect – mine not so much. But it prompted me to go and have a proper eye exam where they detected the glaucoma.

But there's another sort of blindness that can be equally limiting and also hard for a person to detect. It's called **prejudice** and it comes in many forms:

- **political** prejudice (think of Liberal party opposition to climate change and welcoming asylum seekers)
- it may be **racial** (think of Pauline Hanson's attitude to Africans, Asians and indigenous people)
- it could be **religious** (think of how Muslims are often perceived)
- it could be **social** (think of how we view those scrambling to get hold of toilet paper supplies)
- or it could be **theological** (think of different attitudes towards the miracles of Jesus or the resurrection)

These attitudes are often learned from parents or peers and can be just as limiting as physical blindness.

Today's Gospel reading sets off **physical** blindness against **theological prejudice**. The first prejudice is that physical conditions such as blindness are caused by some sort of **sin**. In other words, the person brought the condition on themselves through their actions. This was a common belief at the time of Jesus as indicated by the question that the disciples ask Jesus: Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Fortunately, this isn't the first question on people's lips when someone contracts corona virus.

Jesus soundly refutes this idea here, as he does elsewhere. Rather than some form of divine judgment, the man's condition provides the opportunity for God to reveal compassion and healing. And so Jesus instigates an unusual two stage healing – rubbing mud on the man's eyes and then telling him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, which may have been used by the Jews as a place of ritual washing. By the time he's

done this, Jesus has disappeared into the crowd.

I presume the man was pretty happy at being able to see for the first time and shared his experience with his friends. When the news spreads to the Pharisees, a second prejudice is highlighted as the healing took place on the Sabbath. The Pharisees assume that the person who healed the blind man must be a sinner because they broke the Jewish law of no 'work' on the Sabbath. When the man tries to defend the actions of Jesus, he too is labelled as a sinner.

For the Pharisees it's a black and white case, while for the author of this Gospel the incident highlights their prejudice. We've been taught of course, to criticise the Pharisees at every opportunity. So this is one of the prejudices **we** often bring to our reading of the New Testament. But we're really quite similar to the Pharisees in some respects – as people who take our faith seriously. And of course some Pharisees like the apostle Paul and Nicodemus turned to Jesus in the end. So does breaking the Sabbath laws makes you a sinner? Probably not, but it depends on your perspective – or your prejudice ...

The debate around Jesus' identity

This is a really well written story, which continues the ongoing debate about Jesus' identity without his direct presence. In this way, it matches the situation facing John's community at the end of the first century when this Gospel was written. Jesus was no longer physically present but there were still heated debates over his identity. It's also similar to our situation.

The man keeps repeating his straightforward story – that he **was** blind but **now** can see, as the hymn [Amazing Grace](#) picks up. His personal experience is hard to dispute, while his expressed faith in Jesus grows steadily through the story. Initially Jesus is simply a man who rubbed mud on his eyes and told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. When pushed by the Pharisees, the man suggests that Jesus is a prophet, someone sent and empowered by God. By the end of the story he is worshipping Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. He is thus presented as an ideal **convert** who has been fully persuaded of Jesus' identity.

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it. John 20:30-31

The presentation all the way through this Gospel is never neutral – it's intended to help you reach the same conclusion.

Meanwhile, the Pharisees dig an ever deepening hole for themselves. Initially **they** are unsure about Jesus – yes, he broke the Sabbath rules – but ... he's obviously done a mighty healing work. As they speak to the man again, their attitude hardens and Jesus is now labelled a sinner. As devout followers of the Law of Moses, they then deny that Jesus could have been sent by God. According to Jesus' final words, they claim to be able to see God's ways, yet they are blind. Their sin is in refusing to consider that Jesus may indeed be speaking and working in God's name.

The ending of the story is designed to leave us as the readers with the lasting impression that the Pharisees are spiritually blind while the formerly blind man is the one who truly sees who Jesus is.

One lingering question for us is to what extent is our faith like that of the blind man, and to what extent is it like the Pharisees?

Where are our blindspots and prejudices?

How would we even know and would we want to change and grow in our faith?

I suspect we need each other's help to open our eyes to other ways of seeing things because all of us tend to read from a similar version of the Bible – the DEV – or Drastically Edited Version. We all need to be gently reminded that while we see some things clearly, in other areas we remain blind ...

- for instance, we may remain blind to the urgent call in the OT to seek justice for all, including our indigenous brothers and sisters and for asylum seekers
- For others, we tend to gloss over the repeated call of Jesus to tell others the good news ... using words
- While others again miss the call to love and care for the poor in practical ways

All of these are important aspects of our mission, our calling to be Christians in the world, but do we see and hear them as addressed to us, personally, and dare to respond – or are we effectively blind? How might we change?

While we can gently help others to see the world differently, ultimately it's **God** who's in the business of opening blind eyes and Jesus who is the light of the world. It takes humility to acknowledge our shortcomings and courage to ask God to help us see people the way that God sees them. And it takes perseverance to change, for our prejudices run deep and old habits die hard.

Personally speaking, I'm up for the challenge. How about you?

We're going to sing the well-known hymn **Amazing grace** now, which was written by John Newton, whose [own story](#) is one of prejudice and blindness towards the black slave trade of the 18th century. He was blind to the injustice and cruelty of the trade but God opened his eyes and he and others such as [William Wilberforce worked tirelessly to end the slave trade](#).