

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1–13, Ephesians 5:8–14 & John 9:1–41

Appearances can often be deceiving can't they?

Before I was ordained, when I was still attending worship at what was my home parish, a young, newcomer started attending the 10am service each Sunday. He looked completely different from everyone else in the congregation. He had multiple piercings in his ears, a big ring through his nose, his head was shaved, except for a mini mohawk, he had a number of tattoos, and he wore a big army overcoat and heavy army boots. He was physically big, and quite an imposing figure. He didn't smile, and he didn't really talk to anyone other than a friend who came to church with him, who was almost as intimidating as he was. Everybody in church gave him a wide berth. You could see that people, myself included, felt uncomfortable being close to him.

One Sunday, while having morning tea after the service, I turned around after getting something to eat, and who should be standing right in front of me but this imposing and intimidating young man. So I nervously said hello, began a conversation with him. He turned out to be one of the most articulate, softly spoken, intelligent and genuinely nice young guys that you could ever hope to meet. Following that initial conversation, he and I became quite friendly with one and another, and we would always catch up and chat on Sunday mornings after church.

In our reading from the First Book of Samuel, God tells the prophet Samuel to go to the town of Bethlehem and find Jesse, because God had chosen one of Jesse's sons to replace Saul as king of Israel. When Jesse's sons were presented before him, Samuel looked at Eliab, who must have been a physically imposing and regal looking individual, because Samuel said to God, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But God said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Of course the son of Jesse that God had chosen to be king was David, a handsome teenager who was a shepherd. God saw something in David that people had yet to see. Lack of sight, or blindness, is the subject of today's gospel passage.

People in the ancient world associated disabilities, such as blindness, with punishment for sin. So in the story of the man born blind from the Gospel of John,

when the disciples saw the blind man, they asked Jesus who was to blame for the man's blindness. Did the man himself sin, or was it his parents? Jesus told them it was neither, but that the man had been born blind so that God's work might be revealed through him. In other words, the man was born blind so that Jesus could restore his sight, and in so doing, the power and glory of God working through Jesus would be revealed.

After Jesus had restored his sight, the man was brought before the Pharisees and questioned about what happened. When he explained how Jesus healed him, rather than being amazed at the miracle itself, several of the Pharisees sought to rule out the possibility that God was working through Jesus when they said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." Rather than accept that God was at work in and through Jesus, the Pharisees focussed on the fact that Jesus had actually broken the law by healing the man on the sabbath.

The Pharisees then suggested that the man had not been blind at all, and they brought his parents in to testify to the fact that he was blind, and that he had been so from birth. They confirmed that he was their son, and they also confirmed that he had been born blind. But when asked how he regained his sight, they told the Pharisees, to ask him themselves. So the Pharisees once again asked the man, and once again, they didn't like the answer he gave them. They refused to acknowledge that Jesus could possibly be from God.

The man then said to the Pharisees, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet 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 a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (John 9:30–33 NRSV) But all that did was to anger the Pharisees even further.

Then Jesus himself said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." (John 9:39 NRSV) Jesus was saying that those who are in spiritual darkness and realise it will receive the "light" of God's revelation in Jesus. But those (like the Pharisees) who think they see, but are really in spiritual darkness, will inevitably reject the true light, which of course is Jesus.

Jesus didn't come into the world to judge, but judgment takes place as a result of his presence in the world. Before he received his sight from Jesus, the blind man was obviously unable to see. And even though he couldn't see, he still recognised that God must be at work in Jesus, because he knew that only God could restore his sight. The Pharisees, on the other hand, were blinded by their own arrogance.

They believed that as disciples of Moses, only they had true knowledge and understanding of God. This arrogance prevented them from seeing the work of God in Jesus, even though it was staring them in the face. They refused to accept the possibility of their own 'spiritual blindness', and they continued to show their arrogance when Jesus accused them of it.

Sometimes our own beliefs and attitudes can affect how we see certain people and situations. Our own experience and learning can colour how we perceive others, and how we understand events and happenings in the world. People are not always who and what we think they are, and situations in the world may not always be the result of what we think them to be. In our own way, we can be "blind" like the Pharisees. At times God is at work in people and situations that we would least expect Him to be.