

## John 9:1-33 – Jesus gives sight to the blind

### Introduction and Background

I remember that when I was about 14, my dad took our family to see the film sensation of 1965, *The Sound of Music*. Most of you will no doubt recall the story. Maria the novice nun is a bit too much of a wild spirit for the convent to be able to contain her and is sent off to work as a governess for the seven children of the widowed captain von Trapp. Eventually, she and the Captain fall in love and in a touching scene Maria sings to the Captain:

Perhaps I had a wicked childhood  
Perhaps I had a miserable youth  
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past  
There must have been a moment of truth

For here you are, standing there, loving me  
Whether or not you should  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good

Nothing comes from nothing  
Nothing ever could  
So somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good

Now this morning I want to provide you with a theological analysis of this song. It seems to me to reflect an attitude which is very common in the world around us. It even has a name: Karma. If something happens in a well-ordered universe, it must have had a cause – "Nothing comes from nothing". If something wonderful happens it must be because I have done something to deserve it – I must have done something good. If something bad happens to me, I must have done something bad to merit it. Perhaps we instil this idea into our children by our own discipline of them: rewards for good behaviour and punishments for bad behaviour. Perhaps we instil this idea into citizens of our country by similar systems of reward and of punishment or disapproval.

And Christians are not immune from falling into this pattern of thinking. We believe that God is in sovereign control of this world which he has created and which he watches over with loving care. He sees and knows about everything we do. He knows the number of hairs on our head and he knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. Before a thought is on our tongue he knows it. So everything must happen for a reason. God did it or, at the very least, he allowed it to happen.

I don't know whether you are familiar with the wonderful Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. The disciple in the Christian faith is asked, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" And the answer which they are to learn by heart is as follows, "That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Now that's a question and answer well worth learning and loving. It affirms God's sovereign oversight of everything that happens in our lives. But this comforting thought prompts questions of this sort: when a godly person suffers from early terminal illness or when a young child dies we ask, "Why did this happen to *him* or to *her*? Why has God permitted this? Why has God inflicted this trouble on this particular person? It's so unfair!

This was the thinking of Job's friends. Job had been careful to live a life honouring to God. He was an example to those living around him. But Job suffered the loss of his possessions and wealth, his children and then his health. His friends suggested that he must have committed some secret sin that had angered God and caused him to be punished like this. Their accusations only added to Job's suffering.

## The disciples' question

And this was the thinking of Jesus' disciples in the passage we have read this morning. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem. As they walked through the streets they saw a beggar who was blind and discovered that he had been born blind – he had never been able to see. The disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Had God caused this poor man to be born blind as punishment for some sin that God had foreseen he would commit, or was he born blind to inflict punishment on his parents for something they had done? It's a good theological question; one that could prompt hours of discussion – remember the extraordinary length of the Book of Job!

But let me suggest to you that if this was how God's providence actually worked in this world we would all be blind.

## Jesus' reply

Jesus is quick to dismiss the assumptions of his disciples. Karma is bad theology: it reflects a wrong view of God and a wrong view of God's world. Jesus tells them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (9:3). Jesus tells them that they must not try to assign immediate blame for disease or disability. Indeed, Jesus does not teach them here anything about who might be responsible for this affliction. Jesus' focus is entirely on what can be done for this man; this man's blindness presents Jesus with an opportunity to do the work of God and to bring glory to God through how he treats this man.

Jesus' answer implies that sickness and disease are characteristics of the world in which we live. It is a world in which sickness, disability, pain and death affect all alike – regardless of the kind of life they live. I have suffered serious illness. I will die. Each one of you will die – unless the Lord Jesus returns before that. It is quite pointless to ask "Why me?", "Why him?", "Why her?" We live in a broken world; a world marked by all manner of misfortunes; a world that is not as we would like it to be – and in a world which is not as God would like it to be.

Jesus' concern is to ask what can be done in the face of such tragic disease, suffering or disability. He states that, "this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him", and he continues, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (9:4). This "work of God" which is about to be displayed for all to see is a work which Jesus himself will perform. He has come into the world to perform the work of God and to display what God wants for his world – to display the heart of God for a broken world. He has come as the light of the world; he has come to shine the light and glory of God into the darkness of this world.

Jesus spat on the ground, made mud or clay from the dust of the earth and from his spittle, smeared it on the eyes of this blind man and told him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam. The man, "went and washed, and came home seeing." (9:7).

Does this act remind you of anything? It reminds me of the description of God's first creation of human beings recorded in Genesis 2:7: "the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." The Lord God created life out of dust from the earth. Jesus performs an act of new creation when, symbolically at least, he forms new and life-filled eyes for this man from the dust of the earth and from the life that was within Jesus himself. He displays the work of God – the creative and re-creative work of God. He displays the life-giving power of God.

## This man's healing a sign

This man's healing is referred to in this chapter of John's gospel as a *sign* (9:16). What is it a sign of?

**Firstly, it is a sign of who Jesus is.** Later in this passage the man who had been blind scornfully responds to the Jewish leaders who were interrogating him saying, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (9:30-33). Now

seeing once blind man thought it was obvious that the man who had healed him was sent from God.

But we know even more. This Jesus has come to do works that only God can do. Through his ministry, "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." (Luke 7:22). And here in John's Gospel, Jesus goes on to tell his Jewish opponents that he and the Father are one (John 10:30) and that if they do not believe his words they need only to look at his works (10:38). What Jesus said so infuriated them that they tried to stone him, thinking that he a mere man was claiming to be God (10:33).

And yes, that was precisely what he claimed. Jesus told his disciples "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). Jesus *is* the living God embodied in a human life. Jesus is God incarnate, God in human flesh. God come to live among us and walk our streets.

This miracle is a sign of who Jesus is.

**Secondly, it is a sign of what Jesus came to do.** God has come among us in the person of the Lord Jesus. But why did he come?

The triune creator God looked down upon his broken world and upon the millions of its inhabitants who were lost and like sheep without a shepherd. It was no longer the world he designed it to be; no longer the world he wanted it to be. And God took pity on what he had made. God determined to put it right, to mend its brokenness, to heal its hurts. God loved the world he had made and sent his Son into the world to save it.

My wife and I were recently watching an episode of the *Antiques Road Show* which we had recorded a couple of months ago. It was filmed from Eltham Palace. It had originally been a grand manor house built by Anthony Bek, Bishop of Durham in 1296. After that it had become one of Edward II's royal palaces. Edward IV had remodelled the palace and added a Great Hall. Henry VIII had spent his childhood at Eltham and had added a new chapel. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the old buildings were in semi-derelict condition and were falling down. But in 1933, Stephen and Virginia Courtauld stepped in to save the site. They restored the old buildings but then added a grand new Art Deco extension to turn it into the home designed for them to live in and enjoy and share with friends.

Jesus came into this world to mend what was broken, heal what was hurt and to transform this tired old world into the world God wanted it to be, a place for his own dwelling in his restored creation. The healing of this blind man is just a small sign of all that Jesus has come to do.

That healing required Jesus to identify himself with this broken world – to become one of us. More than that, it required him to take upon himself all its brokenness and pain as he hung there upon the cross. And in his resurrection he defeated death and proclaimed God's great "No more!" to brokenness pain and death. He is the beginning of the new creation. And at his return all things shall be made new. The blind shall see, the lame will leap for joy, the deaf shall hear and all creation shall be filled with the presence and glory of God. No more pain. No more tears. No more hatred and discord. No more jealousy and war. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." No more hurt. Even the trees of the fields shall join in the rejoicing when the Lord comes.

The healing of this blind man is a foretaste of that day when, through Jesus' wounds and risen power, all things shall be healed. Do you not long for that day?

**Thirdly, it is a sign of how we should live.** Did you notice Jesus' words in response to the disciples' question? He did not say, "As long as it is day, I must do the works of him who sent me." He said, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (9:4-5). He tells his disciples, "we must do the works of him who sent me." You are to follow me in doing the works that I have done. You also are to do the works of God. "While I am in the world", he says, "I am the light of the world." But when I am gone, you are to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). You are to bring the light of God's presence, grace and glory into every dark corner of this world. You are to be

people who anticipate that great final day of transformation by bringing the transforming and renewing power of God into the broken situations around you.

Now, despite the words of Jesus in John 14:12, I do not believe that we can do everything Jesus could do. We cannot command the wind and the waves to obey us – King Cnut proved that. In his goodness, God sometimes performs miraculous healing through our prayers, but more often he does not. Complete healing awaits the return of our glorious Saviour.

But in the meantime, we are to do the work he did – the works of the one who sent him. Faced with the pain of a broken world around us, we are to resist the temptation to ask "whose fault is this." Like the Saviour himself, we are sent into the world not to judge the world but to bring healing to its hurts and to be a people whose work is a sign, anticipating the age to come.

Christians have a long history of being at the forefront of caring for the sick, the frail and the elderly; being involved in the foundation of hospitals and in the hospice movement. Christians were involved in the formation of the RSPCA. William Wilberforce, as well as devoting his life to the abolition of slavery, campaigned for animals to be protected from unnecessary harm and was a founder of the RSPCA. Christians today need to be in the vanguard of movements that promote reconciliation between peoples, care for the poor and for our ravaged planet and damaged environment. We need to be those who promote healing in a broken world and to point people to the one who can alone heal its deepest hurts.

Let me close by quoting a song by Graham Kendrick that reflects this challenge:

Beauty for brokenness,  
hope for despair,  
Lord, in your suffering world  
this is our prayer.

Bread for the children,  
justice, joy, peace  
sunrise to sunset,  
your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives,  
cures for their ills,  
work for the craftsman,  
trade for their skills;  
land for the dispossessed,  
rights for the weak,  
voices to plead the cause  
of those who can't speak.

God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come, change our love  
from a spark to a flame.

Refuge from cruel wars,  
havens from fear,  
cities for sanctuary  
freedoms to share.  
Peace to the killing-fields,  
scorched earth to green,  
Christ for the bitterness,  
his cross for the pain

Rest for the ravaged earth,  
oceans and streams  
plundered and poisoned –

our future, our dreams.  
Lord, end our madness,  
carelessness, greed;  
make us content with  
The things that we need

God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come, change our love  
from a spark to a flame.

Lighten our darkness,  
breathe on this flame  
until your justice  
burns brightly again;  
until the nations  
learn of your ways,  
seek your salvation  
and bring you their praise.

God of the poor,  
friend of the weak,  
give us compassion we pray:  
melt our cold hearts,  
let tears fall like rain;  
come, change our love  
from a spark to a flame.

Let's make this our prayer and the purpose of our lives that we might truly be disciples of our Lord Jesus and a sign that points to the hope of his coming.

Peter Misselbrook

Pendennis Evangelical Church – 11/8/2019