

Lent 4 Year A

Do you see? It's an almost unnoticed rhetorical flourish. Do you see, or perhaps just See? In other words, Do you realize that what I am saying is correct? A phrase which literally refers to visual activity has passed through many semantic stages, and come to mean, "please agree with me". See? We don't actually need anything more than the single word. If I finish a sentence and follow it with a monosyllable, you all know what I mean. See?

Of course, often people don't see. I could spend a long time trying to persuade you of something of which I was utterly convinced, and you might well not see it. There is no reason why you should agree with me. What to me might seem obvious to you might well seem unconvincing. And vice versa. And our ability to communicate, and properly to converse, would suffer as a result.

"Do you see" is the question asked by the whole of the fourth gospel. It is presented most obviously in the passage we heard this morning, the story in chapter nine of the healing of the man born blind. And that story, crafted and dramatic as it clearly is, serves as a type of the entire

gospel text. We, the readers and hearers, are being challenged to acknowledge that we see, that we both perceive and understand what is happening in the words and the actions of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made Flesh.

There is far more in John 9 than a single sermon can treat, but before we even scratch the surface, we need to know a tiny bit of Greek. The word which the evangelist uses to mean “I know” is a word which comes from another verb meaning “I have seen”. That perfect tense – I have seen – is being used to indicate that something has happened in the past which has a present effect. In other words, having seen in the past, the person concerned now knows, in the present, the truth of the case. Do you see?

Do you see? is of course a question which can be asked in the negative. Don't you see? And don't you see is tantamount to saying “Are you blind?” a question which is being asked of everyone who appears in this gospel narrative, and everyone who attends to it. Everyone, that is, apart from Jesus.

The tale is familiar enough – Jesus encounters a man born blind, and he heals him by making clay and putting it on his eyes, an act which reminded the early Christian theologians of the creation of the first man from the dust of the ground. The Pharisees, horrified that this man has been healed on the Sabbath, conduct an enquiry as to how the man has received his sight. The man himself is clear – Jesus has healed him, and Jesus is a prophet. They assume him to be lying. “Give God the glory: we know this man is a sinner”, but confronted with their urges to tell the truth, the one who is no longer blind does just that: whether he is a sinner or not, I do not know. One thing I know, that I was blind, and now I see.

New Testament scholars have made much of the way in which this story is presented as an investigation not simply into Jesus but into the one whom he has healed. When the Pharisees approach the man’s parents, they are afraid to speak, and the narrator tells us that this is because they feared expulsion from the synagogue. Such expulsions didn’t take place until decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and so the writer seems to be using the miracle story to comment on the conflicts of his own time. But the testimony of the man born blind remains the chapter’s central challenge, One thing I know – one thing I know now, because I have seen. One thing I know: though I was blind, now I see.

We heard a shortened version of the story this morning, but it's worth following the whole thing through. As a playwright creating scenes for the stage, the evangelist presents us with a series of two handers, conversations, or disputes between one person and another, or one person and another group. First Jesus and his disciples: Jesus tells them that the man is blind only so that God's glory can be manifest. Then Jesus and the blind man, he meets speaks to him and heals him. Then the blind man and his neighbours, who refuse to believe that this is the same person who was the blind beggar. He stands up for himself: I am the man. Then we have the Pharisees arguing with the blind man, then we see them go and ask his parents before returning to him. Finally, Jesus reveals himself fully to the man who was blind and condemns the Pharisees for being unable to see.

What is happening here? What we may not have noticed, what we might have failed to see, is that the central character in this chapter is not Jesus, it is the man who was born blind. He is given his sight, enabled to see, by Jesus' creative act of miraculous healing, and being the recipient of God's transforming grace, he then becomes the object of dispute. The arguments with his neighbours, with the Pharisees, with his parents, are arguments about what has happened to him, arguments

which he is having. Tellingly, when his neighbours question whether or not this is really the same person, he stands up for himself with an important little phrase: I am he – in Greek, ego eimi, the same phrase Jesus repeatedly uses in the great “I am” saying – I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, and on – and exactly the same phrase as is used in the Greek Bible to render the words of the Lord to Moses from the burning bush: Ego eimi – I am.

Surely no-one but Jesus should be using this phrase in such a loaded manner. We might think so, but we can't yet see the full picture. A transformation has taken place before our eyes. The man has become Jesus. The one who has been transformed by God's creative act, the one who has experienced the presence of Christ and emerged an utterly changed person, has become the representative of Christ in the world. The one who was blind and now can see, can only see because Jesus has given him his sight, because this sight – true sight, genuine perception – belongs in the gospel only to Jesus, as his gift to those who receive his incarnate love. He now stands, as each of us, as Christ's representative in the world. The change brought about in him by the presence of Christ makes him the object of bewilderment on the part of his friends and neighbours who do not understand, the object of fear and contempt on

the part of those who fear the nearness of God and the revolution of love which sweeps away the comforts and securities of the past.

His friends and neighbours cannot deal with this new reality. They cast him out, but Jesus seeks and finds him. Do you believe in the Son of Man, he asks, and when the man asks who this is, Jesus response is simple and utterly compelling: you have seen him, it is he who speaks to you.

This man, born blind, is the one who truly can see. He stands before us in the gospel, challenging our blindness, witnessing to Jesus, offering us illumination, the truth of the sight which is given by God. He reassures us by his faith that we too may receive that sight. Jesus words to him become his words to us, the reassurance of the light of Christ. You have seen him. It is he who speaks to you.