

Lent 4 2020  
John 9:1-41

All Souls, Clevedon  
The Reverend Sarah Park

Well then. This is not the Lent four service  
any of us anticipated, even a week ago!

At first glance, the healing of the man born blind  
seems to have little to do with the situation  
within which we find ourselves.  
And yet, this Gospel reading has a number of things  
to offer us in this very peculiar time.  
Let me draw your attention to them.

This passage is effectively a healing story with a theological  
argument woven around it.  
And because of the argument, it is long.

The theological argument comes in the form of a question, posed  
by Jesus' disciples.  
It is to do with the man's blindness.  
They ask, effectively, who's fault is it? Who sinned?  
This man or his parents?  
This is a question that has plagued humanity  
for all of our existence. Why do bad things happen?  
Is it judgement? Whose fault is it?

These are questions I am hearing being posed  
in relation to COVID-19.  
Why has the world been brought to its knees  
by this virus? Is this the judgement of God?

The same question was asked after the Christchurch  
earthquakes. It is a very human question.

Notice that in this morning's passage,  
when asked the question about who sinner Jesus replies,  
**Neither** this man **nor** his parents.  
He goes on to say that as a result of this healing  
God's works might be revealed in the man.

This is a really important distinction  
between there being a cause of the man's suffering,  
and good coming out of the situation.  
It's the difference between the two theological statements:  
*everything happens for a reason,*  
(which has God operating the world like a chessboard inflicting  
judgment and suffering at will)  
*versus nothing is wasted*  
(which has God working for the redemption of all situations).

Is this pandemic the judgement of God?  
I do not believe so.  
COVID-19 is simply behaving as viruses do.

As a result we have no choice but to  
reevaluate what matters.  
I have no doubt that we are entering  
very challenging times.  
However, I also believe that nothing is wasted,  
and given the opportunity we may even discover new and deeper

ways to be in community together,  
new and deeper understandings of God.

The second thing in this reading,  
David Lose drew my attention to.  
The man in the story is defined by deficit. He  
is the man born blind, not the man who can now see. Lose writes  
this:

“Once Jesus heals him, he is referred to directly several more  
times. He is “the man who used to beg.”,  
“the man who formerly had been blind.”  
and simply “the blind man.”  
It is as if those questioning him refuse to accept  
the transformation that has occurred for him.  
All of these designations invite us to understand him in terms of  
what he used to be and, notably,  
in terms of his limitations.

David Lose says,  
“I wonder how often we do that in our lives as well – define  
ourselves in terms of limiting factors or difficult things we’ve  
experienced. Even if we’ve overcome them, and take a measure  
of pride in that, I still wonder if it does justice to our current  
reality or links us too strongly to the past.”

Former blindness is also only **one** dimension  
of the man’s identity.

We are in a season when limitations surround us.  
Our own fear is most likely the biggest.  
But alongside that we are struggling to adapt to  
rapidly changing restrictions on movement  
and social interaction.  
We have ended up making a whole lot of Lenten sacrifices we  
never intended making.  
COVID-19 creates a base level of anxiety which is unfortunately  
exacerbated by the measures designed to keep us safe while  
simultaneously distancing us from support networks.

It would be very easy to define ourselves  
in terms of the things we have lost,  
in terms of the things we are fearful of.  
But those are only **part** of the story.  
Beauty and kindness are also true.  
And we are a people of faith.

My colleague Brenda Rockell wrote,  
“We know that whatever happens,  
in prayer and with one another  
we will still be held in God's watchful care  
and cannot be separated from God's love and life  
through Christ.  
These are eternal realities,  
and the ups and downs of the coming months,  
stressful as they may be, cannot change them.”

Bishop Steven Charleston wrote this week:

“Now is the time for which our faith has prepared us.

Now is the moment when all that we believe  
can be put to work.

Now we can turn to the inner resources we have been  
developing over these many years to face the challenge of a  
world in desperate need.

We are not afraid of this crisis for we have been made ready for  
it. We have devoted our lives to the belief that something  
greater than fear or disease guides human history.

We have studied, prayed and grown in the Spirit.

Now we come to the call to use what we believe.

Our people need hope, confidence, courage and compassion:  
the very things for which we have been trained.

We are the calm in the midst of a storm.

Stand your ground and let your light so shine that others may see  
it and find their faith as well.”

So, how do we remain as a church community –  
supporting one another and those beyond our doors –  
when we are dispersed? Well funny you should ask.

Conversations will not be cancelled.

Relationships will not be cancelled.

Love will not be cancelled.

Songs will not be cancelled.

Reading will not be cancelled.

Self-care will not be cancelled.

Hope will not be cancelled.

Nor will worship. It will just be very different.

From next week, Sunday services will be online.

I am in the process of figuring out how to do that.

Fortunately, I married John Chapman!

In order to make worship accessible to everyone,  
we have a form for you to fill out –

to ensure we can send you the necessary information if you're  
online, or at the very least get a Prayer Book into your hands  
before you leave

so you can be following the liturgy we are following.

Also on that form will be information that will help us to maintain  
relationships with each other –

by creating little clusters of parishioners  
to be in touch over the phone.

There's also the option to ask for help with groceries or  
pharmaceuticals,  
and the option to offer that help.

Because God's grace is not cancelled.

And neither is our call to live that out.

I am working on a resource with ideas for building community,  
for deepening faith,

and for staying connected to hope and gratitude.

It's for us and it will be shared online with the community.

It is one of our gifts to the locals.

I've lost track of the number of times the word 'unprecedented' has been used on the news this week.  
I'm going to go with 'unchartered'.  
These waters are unfamiliar to us,  
but they are not unfamiliar to God.  
We navigate these waters in the company of Christ,  
who healed the blind and stilled the storm.

Please pray for each other, for our nation and world.  
Pray particularly for those charged with leading us,  
doing their very best to keep us safe,  
for health workers and supermarket employees.  
Now is a time for us to dig deep into our faith  
to be people of hope and compassion  
to build community, to deepen relationships,  
to work to ensure that nothing is wasted.

Amen.