

Lent 4: Sunday 22 March 2020
Christ Church South Yarra
Sermon by Craig D'Alton

Some months ago when I began to make some notes for this sermon series on faith, I picked a question out of each of the four Gospel readings as titles for each sermon. This week's question, asked at the end of the story by some of the pharisees listening to Jesus, is "Surely we are not blind, are we?"

It's a choice of question that seems to have been remarkably prescient.

The story of the man born blind is long - very long. It is repetitive – very repetitive, and deliberately so. It is full of people who won't take no for an answer, and some who won't even take yes for an answer. It is full of misunderstanding, bewilderment, jockeying for position, and fear. And it is full of questions.

It's the perfect story for this Sunday.

So let's turn the text itself, and some of the key questions it contains.

Question 1: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The idea that people are afflicted with illness or disability as punishment for sin is an ancient one. Its corollary – that God will protect good or "elect" people from harm – is equally fallacious. One of the saddest things I have seen as the pandemic has unfolded has been some religious leaders claiming that God will protect them or their community from the virus – and presumably punish everyone else instead.

There are, actually, *some* occasions where people suffer illness or affliction because of their own sinful folly – and sadly this may be such an occasion. There are already documented instances of severe

outbreaks of the virus in religious groups that arrogantly believed that they would be immune.

This is not a time to be self-righteous, and certainly not a time not to be willfully foolish.

When Martin Luther was asked about how to respond to the Plague, he wrote these wise words:

"I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the death of others. If my neighbour needs me however I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as stated above. See this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God."

Question 2: Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?

The man's neighbours are not sure whether they even recognize him now that he is no longer blind. They have, in effect, always been blind as to who he really was, perhaps because they never really looked at him. All they could see was his blindness, not his humanity.

In times as extreme as this, we have to open our eyes to seeing old familiar things in new unfamiliar ways – to see things as they really are.

Many of the familiar things in our lives are going to look unfamiliar, even unrecognizable, over the coming months. This is true even of the church. We will not be able to gather as we have done hitherto, possibly not for quite some time. And when we do gather again, it is likely that we may look very different, and see each other with differently focused eyes. In such circumstances we must hold on to what is important, and what is core – our humanity, the place of God in

the world, the injunction to love one another. So do not be stressed if, for example, the services of Holy Week do not take place in the usual way. God will still be God, the world will still keep turning, and the church will still be the church. Look instead for the inner core of faith, not just the outward forms.

Question 3: Where is he?

The man's neighbours want to know where the healer is. It's a fair question. We might be asking it ourselves right now: Where is Jesus? Where is God?

There will be times in the coming months when some of us will seek Jesus and find him elusive. Our prayer, especially if we are in extended isolation, or ill, or, God-forbid, even dying, may sometimes feel empty and unanswered. My advice in such situations is: persist. Find a routine that works for you, and that gives God room to speak. The most holy of people have times of spiritual dearth. It is often the continuation of an established routine that enables them to move through those dark or distant times. So find a manageable spiritual routine that suits you, and try to stick with it no matter what. It might be a time of prayer or Bible reading at a set hour each day or each week. It might be putting the CCSY Facebook livestream into your diary, and tuning in daily or once a week. It might be even be doing someone's regular shopping for them as an act of Christian charity because they are stuck at home. It might be something else entirely. Above all, keep asking the faith questions. Keep seeking after Jesus.

There are many other questions in this story. It would take an hour or more even to touch on them all. But it is the final one that strikes me most. We have encountered it already:

Question 4: Surely we are not blind, are we?

Last week, the Samaritan woman at the well called Jesus a prophet. A prophet is someone able to read the signs of the times. How can we be prophetic in the midst of so much uncertainty? How can we read the

signs of such troubled times? How do we ask the right questions? How do we make ourselves open to finding God, even in the midst of strangeness, or contradiction; of an almost endless series of challenges to the way we thought the world worked?

At the end of this pandemic, will we have accumulated the wisdom to ask the right questions, or will we instead have spent so much time chasing our tails in panic that we simply continue to ask the old questions, now stale, and miss the point entirely? Will we use the time being given to us to regain our prophetic sight, or will we remain in blindness?

Fr Glenn Loughrey from St Oswald's Glen Iris has made some wonderful interventions on social media in recent days. I particularly like this injunction: "Now is the time to "be still, very, very still and above all do not wobble." It is as Thomas More says "The time of doing no thing". It is a fallow time, a time to sit and practice *whin-nga-era*; listen, hear and reflect."

Is God perhaps calling us into a time of prayerful silence and reflection, in order that new questions may emerge, and that in our silence we may begin to discern God's response to our prayers? Is God perhaps calling us – even forcing us – to open our eyes, and to see both creation and humanity in a new way?