

March 22, 2020 – B, Mothering Sunday

John 9:1-41

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart (StF 545)

Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound (StF 440)

Let love be real – StF 615

Now thank we all our God – StF 81ii

===ORDER OF SERVICE===

Call to worship

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart (StF 545)

Prayer

John 9:1-41

Amazing Grace – how sweet the sound (StF 440)

Meditation: Whose fault is it anyway?

Let love be real – StF 615

Collection (reminder that churches still need funds to continue the work!)

Intercessions – for our mothers and those who mother us

Now thank we all our God – StF 81ii

Benediction

(Hand out ‘virtual posies’?)

John 9 The Message (MSG)

9¹⁻² Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

3-5 Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s Light.”

6-7 He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man’s eyes, and said, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “Sent”). The man went and washed—and saw.

8 Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, “Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

9 Others said, “It’s him all right!”

But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.”

He said, “It’s me, the very one.”

10 They said, “How did your eyes get opened?”

11 “A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ I did what he said. When I washed, I saw.”

12 “So where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

13-15 They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, “He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see.”

16 Some of the Pharisees said, “Obviously, this man can’t be from God. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath.”

Others countered, “How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?” There was a split in their ranks.

17 They came back at the blind man, “You’re the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?”

He said, “He is a prophet.”

18-19 The Jews didn’t believe it, didn’t believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, “Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

20-23 His parents said, “We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don’t know how he came to see—haven’t a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don’t you ask him? He’s a grown man and can speak for himself.” (His parents were talking like this because they were intimidated by the Jewish leaders, who had already decided that anyone who took a stand that this was the Messiah would be kicked out of the meeting place. That’s why his parents said, “Ask him. He’s a grown man.”)

24 They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, “Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor.”

25 He replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see.”

26 They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

27 “I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?”

²⁸⁻²⁹ With that they jumped all over him. “*You* might be a disciple of that man, but we’re disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from.”

³⁰⁻³³ The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

³⁴ They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street.

³⁵ Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

³⁶ The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

³⁷ Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

³⁸ “Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him.

³⁹ Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.”

⁴⁰ Some Pharisees overheard him and said, “Does that mean you’re calling us blind?”

⁴¹ Jesus said, “If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”

Whose fault is it anyway?

Virtual worship on Mothering Sunday!

This Corona Crisis has really changed things dramatically –
On a day when we'd expect to be with family members –
Or at least worshipping with others at church,

Most of us are stuck at home...

And some of us are feeling rather grumpy about it all...

Whether we're on our own

Or we've been cooped up unexpectedly with family members several days now!

Several times this week I've felt as if an elephant has stomped on my diary –

On my life! On the whole world!

As with any new and overwhelming situation – or an ongoing-not-getting-better situation –

The temptation is to find someone/something to blame...

It's not hard to find examples of this everywhere: on social media, on the news broadcast

When the supermarket shelves are empty –

Or we can't get out at all and find ourselves completely isolated

When family spats become more intense and personal...

And there is no reprieve from the daily routines that kept us 'sane' and healthy –

Our human tendency is to look for who's to blame....

I was admittedly a little grumpy when I first looked at today's scripture

About a blind man and Jesus – and who can really see...

What does that have to do with Mothering Sunday? With social distancing?

But then I realised that this story, too, starts out with a Blame Game:

The disciples are asking Jesus who was to blame for the man's blindness...

Was it his own sin or his parents' sin?

Not so very different from our own tendency to demand:

As children we often blame our parents for our circumstances

As parents, we can blame our children for things...

Wives blame husbands and husbands blame wives,

Students blame teachers and teachers blame students

With the Corona virus, many first blamed the Chinese, then the Italians,

then the NHS, then the government for not doing enough or doing too much...

We tend to look for scapegoats for the problems in our society

Who's to blame?

Now there is a certain benefit in looking for causes of distress –

For identifying ways we can improve, for bad habits we can break,

For accepting responsibility for things we do wrong or badly,

Whether or not those actions were intentional

And then for making the changes that need to be made.

With the Corona virus and the government decrees,

We can think through how we personally might be helping or hindering

The efforts at isolation for the good of us all...

But to assume that someone else or some group or some situation is to blame

When things are difficult for us, is not ultimately going to be helpful.

Assuming ourselves always to be the Victim and that everyone is out to get us

Is not going to turn us into the Victor...

Sometimes things just happen.

Put another way: bad things happen to us all.
It's not so much a matter of what has happened
But how we respond.

So we take another look at the story: how did Jesus respond?

He says: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned;
he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'

Perhaps Jesus is saying that what's perceived as a curse
Might actually be a blessing...

Hmmm... where is the blessing in the corona virus chaos?

Some folks have been pointing to the improvement in the air quality in cities
As motor traffic has come to a standstill

Others have been showing how many of us are doing a better job
Of looking out for our neighbours!

I have noticed that my grandsons are becoming more appreciative
Of toilet paper!

And we're all becoming a bit more aware of how we interact with each other –
Or even how much we miss each other...

There's a story from the 'Sayings of the Desert Fathers' about a hermit...

"A restless brother in a desert community frequently became angry with his brothers.

So he thought to himself: 'I'll go and live in a place of solitude;

Once I won't have to speak to or listen to anyone I shall be at peace

And the anger thing will disappear.'

So he went to live alone in a cave.

One day he filled a jug with water for himself and placed it on the floor.

It suddenly overturned.

He filled it a second time, and the same thing happened, as it did a third time.

His anger flared up and he smashed the jug in rage.

Later, when he came to himself,

he realised he had been subverted by the spirit of anger,

and that he had no one to blame.

'Here am I alone,' he said to himself,

'and despite this the spirit of anger has conquered me.

I shall return to the community, for in every place there is a need for struggle,

For patient perseverance,

And, above all, for the help of God.'

So he returned to his community."

In these days of social isolation, we can think again about how deal with our 'demons',

The ones we like to blame on others

And the ones that live within us.

The demons that cause us to be in conflict with ourselves, with God, with each other.

Very few of us actually enjoy Conflict –

It makes us feel uncomfortable

It challenges our assumptions...

But conflict is where the healing can come as well –
When we give each other the space:
Space to be right
Space to be wrong
Space to be forgiven
Space to make amends
Space to be reconciled
Space to become more fully who we are each meant to be

God puts us into families –
Some of those families are our birth families
Some are chosen families
Our church families often become very close to us as well
Often these ‘family’ members are the ones who best know how to ‘push our buttons’
But these are also the ones with whom we have the most opportunity
To figure out how we are going to be blessed and healed together.
Our families and close relationships give us the space with the other
to live and love and grow
To listen and see each other as we really are
and still to bless each other.

In our story of the Blind Man, that’s what Jesus was doing...
He was listening hard to what was going on in the blind man’s life –
And what was going on in the religious leaders’ lives...
Seeking out ways to go beyond ‘blame’ and instead ‘bless’

In the case of the blind man, Jesus ‘sees’ beyond the blind man’s apparent physical disability
He sees a potential within – that just needs a healing touch...
OK – he cures it by spitting on mud and smearing that in the blind man’s eyes –
Which definitely would NOT be in accord with NHS regulations!
But the point is that Jesus is not bothered about who-did-what to cause the problem –
He’s not into the Blame Game
He’s more interested in the Blessing.
And he works with the man to start out the blessing,
But then he gives him responsibility as well –
To go out and wash – to take his medicine!
(I wonder if he sang Happy Birthday while he was washing up!)

I also notice that Jesus doesn’t cure everyone in this story –
Indeed, this act of healing
serves to reveal the spiritual blindness of the others gathered round!

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There was a lady I’ll call ‘Emma’ in one of my previous churches –
She was blind but acutely aware!
Often she would be the only one in the church congregation
Who would catch something in my voice –
After the service, she’d say softly to me: “Something’s troubling you today –
I can hear it in your voice...”
It wasn’t a case of ‘why are you so tired? Aren’t you taking care of yourself?’
It wasn’t placing blame – it was showing concern...

In her own way, Emma was being a good mother to me.
My own mother might have picked up something in my voice –
But my own mother was half-a-world away,
And in her place, God has given me many other mothers --
especially in the various church congregations –
And some of those ‘mothers’ weren’t even women!
I am learning to be grateful for them all!

God has also given me many other people to mother as well –
I’ve spoken of my own children and grandchildren –
But there are so many others as well...

There is something definitely Divine
In acknowledging the motherly love with which God loves us –
And which enables us to mother and be mothered by each other.

Those are qualities that we particularly share on this Mothering Sunday –
A good Mother will love us, no matter what –
And even though we might not have had a mother who could live up to that standard
We still recognise that as a motherly trait –
We still recognise the godliness of motherly love
We still recognise God.
We still yearn for God and that kind of love.

Even in John’s gospel story today,
The blind man’s parents don’t quite make the mark –
They seem to be hesitant to take responsibility for him!
“Thanks, Mum and Dad,” I can hear him murmuring –
“Just when I need you to back me up, you’re afraid to stand up for me!”

Human parents fail. Not always. But we all fail at some point.

Jesus sees past all that failure.
Jesus sees each of us for who we are – God’s own Beloved
With potential beyond our wildest dreams
Potential for all that is good and right and true.
Jesus sets us in families – birth and blood and childhood homes –
Families that sometimes sustain us through adulthood
And sometimes fail miserably
But there is always potential to rebuild and re-form and be reconciled
With the reality that is –
A reality that is Good and Right and True.

Even when we’re blind to see it in our very midst.
The miracle of love and acceptance is there – in the love Jesus has for each of us –
A love which is not blinded by the Blame Game and finding fault –
A love which sees the loveliness and wholeness in each of us
If we only have the ‘eyes’ to see...