

March 19, 2023

THAT'S ALL THAT MATTERS.

John 9: 1 – 41

Our Gospel reading for today is quite long - 41 verses long. It's about a man who was born blind and was healed of his blindness by Jesus. Of great interest is the fact that just two of those 41 verses record the miracle of the man gaining his sight, while thirty-nine verses record the reaction of people - and what a reaction it was. The Pharisees, who were the religious leaders of the day, instead of rejoicing and celebrating with the man that he was able to see, they instead took him to task. The man was grilled, disbelieved, dismissed, threatened, criticized and ostracised. Not once did they rejoice or celebrate with him.

But I love the way he responded to them, he did not get angry or intimidated or doubtful; he simply said to those who were doubting and dismissing him: you can think whatever you want to think, one thing I know - I was blind but now I see. For him, that's all that mattered. They could dissect and debate what happened or did not happen as much as they wanted, for him all that mattered was that he was blind and now he is seeing.

The problem with those Pharisees was that over time, they had come to understand God as operating only within the rules and principles which they understood and accepted, and by which they lived. The Great I Am, the Alpha and the Omega, the Holy Mystery had been reduced – shrunk- to fit their understanding and confined to operate within their parameters. They took it upon themselves to be the sole authority of what was of God and what was not, how God should and should not act, and anything that did not fit within their understanding of who God was and how God operated, was dismissed.

The fact that the man was standing there before them able to see did not matter, for them, his story just did not fit their understanding of God.

The Pharisees were doing what many of us have grown accustomed to doing: reducing God to the size of our intellect and dismissing that which we do not understand, or which is different. We strip God of sovereignty, mystery and wonder and recast God into an ally that we enlist on our terms. We have become

good at critiquing and dismissing, but not so good at humbly acknowledging the power and sovereignty of God.

Let's be honest, we too have a hard time when God gets beyond our neat little world, when we are pushed to think in new ways, to see things differently and to take a new path.

Too often we draw boundaries where God did not intend boundaries to be drawn. We try to control the scripts of our lives and the lives of others, and of how God deals with us, and if God doesn't fit into our expectations, we slam the door.

There is a great danger when we try to fit God into our little boxes; it makes us be blind to what God can do and is doing in our world, in our lives, and in the lives of others. Seeking to confine God to our limited understanding can rob us of the joy of knowing and experiencing the presence, power and love of God in ways that we never imagined.

This story from John's Gospel is a challenge to us: it challenges us to see the hand of God at work in our lives, and in the lives of others in ways that are new and different; in ways that do not fit into our understanding of things and in ways that sometimes defy explanation. Listen again to the great statement of faith by the man once blind, "One thing I know, I was blind but now I see."

He received his sight; he encountered God in Christ, and he literally had a new perspective on life, and that's what mattered.

How do we know and experience God?"

I have been thinking about that a lot, and as I search the scripture there is only one answer that I see, and it is that God is known and experienced in relationships. God is not experienced through creedal confessions, doctrinal statements and theological propositions – those are important but supplementary information. God is not encountered through observance of religious dogma and principles - as the Pharisees believed. God is known in actual, experienced relationships, and it's not for anyone to decide what that experience should be for someone else. God does not fit into our moulds or work according to our formulas.

Whether that experience comes about by touching the hem of Jesus' garment, as did the woman who was suffering from haemorrhages for 12 years, or by Jesus making mud out of spit and spreading it on the eyes of the blind man in today's story, it does not matter, what matters is that something has changed, something has shifted, and that is how we know God.

God meets us in various ways and in the various places and states in our lives - in our triumphs and in our setbacks, in our questioning and in our searching. And what makes those encounters real is not whether other people understand and accept them, but the shift that has taken place in our lives, and the good that results from that shift – for us and for others.

You know what you have gone through, and you know the experiences you have had when your faith was stirred, when hope was rekindled, when courage was ignited, when strength was renewed, when joy was restored, when “your heart was strangely warmed”. You may not understand it, and you may not be able to explain it, but you know that something has shifted; you know that something comforting and empowering and renewing has happened. You encountered God.

God touches our lives, sometimes in simple, ordinary and familiar ways – the comfort of a friend, the help of a neighbour, the kindness of a stranger - and sometimes God touches our lives in strange, spectacular and even miraculous ways. However it happens, it is God making himself known. Don't let anyone take that from you because they do not understand it, and because it does not fit into the mould that they have for God.

When you experienced the presence and power of God you see life differently, and not everybody will see as you see. There are always going to be those who would make various issues the litmus test of whether one is a follower of Jesus; let us not become one of those. Instead, let us as people in relationship with Christ and with God, make sure that we have "Open Hearts and Open Minds" so that we don't shut ourselves and others out of the blessings of God.

Listen again to the statement of faith by the man born blind, "One thing I know, I was blind but now I see." That's all that mattered.

Let us pray. Gracious God, forgive us in our foolishness when we think we know more than we do, Help us to see as you would have us to see, that we may not be so blind in our little world, that we do not see the kingdom that you're building for us and for others. Amen.

Rev. Sydney Elias