The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity 2016
Evensong: John 9

Can you believe it's October already? I don't know where this year's gone to! And as we're almost in looking back mode, 2016 seems to have been a pretty dismal year. We began with the migrant crisis. Can you remember the sanctuary being full of children's shoes week after week, from Christmas right up to Easter, as we offered them, blessed them and sent them to Lesbos where wave upon wave of migrants were coming ashore in unseaworthy vessels. Most were fleeing civil war in Syria. And now, our hearts are still being torn apart by pictures from the same conflict: Aleppo will forever be remembered among that pantheon of atrocities with Rwanda, Sarajevo, Auschwitz, Coventry, Dresden. And what's more 2016 seems to have bene the year when there's simply been resignation to the fact that war in Syria will not end for years and years to come.

2016 will be remembered in Britain as the year when we had the most dismal referendum campaign over EU membership. Never mind the result, the campaigning alone, by both parties, demonstrated what our national imagination has been reduced to: an unquestioning assumption that the only way to look at anything is through a cost/benefit analysis. As if that's all that matters in life: are you going to be £400 a year better off inside the EU or outside the EU?

But in the middle of all this there's been the inspiration and the sheer joy of Rio 2016. The really earnest part of me, if I'm not careful, can start getting all sniffy about a country that is leaving families destitute by withdrawing benefits and public services choosing to prioritise training athletes and effectively buying our way to second place in the medals table. But I should be careful and resist that earnestness because there's a clear Biblical principle – it's why tithing was established way back in the early days of Hebrew society – of setting aside, no matter how

tough things are, a certain proportion of what you've got for sheer unadulterated enjoyment. Otherwise life gets ground down.

And one of the most wonderful things about Rio 2016 has been the breaking down of the distinction between the Olympic Games and the Paralympics. People just think of Rio 2016 and that includes the Paralympics as much as the Olympic Games. And people like Hannah Cockcroft and Kadeena Cox are respected as elite athletes who simply happen to have a disability. Think of someone like Libby Clegg and you think of a sprinter, who happens to be visually impaired.

All of which is something really to be rejoiced over; but all of which makes reading the Bible even more difficult. John chapter 9 is a story about a blind man being healed. Jesus did heal people; it was one of the main characteristics of his earthly ministry; the incident recorded here may well have happened. The Bible is history, but its drama is played on different levels of history: there's the level of the story that's being rehearsed; the level of the community who first rehearsed it; and there's the level of our community as we receive it today. The factual accuracy of story operating at that first level of history is the least significant thing about it.

What's really important about this story is how it acts as a parable for the community who first recorded it and for us today. The parable worked really well for John's community when the gospel was written. We're not really sure who there were or just when these stories were committed to writing. But whoever precisely they were, there was no problem at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second century accepting that choosing not to follow Jesus is to be blind; and blindness is a spiritual handicap. And similarly to follow Jesus is to be complete in a way a blind person obviously isn't.

In 2016 that sort of parabolic metaphor is offensive and we have to work hard to get over it and to allow the Bible to speak to us. But the Bible does speak to us and we meet Jesus leaping out of the page as we read it. Jesus is with us today, as he was with the Christians of John's community, with as much reality and transforming force as when he was physically present in his earthly ministry. He is offering to transform and equip us in just as miraculous way as he transformed the life of that young man in the story and equipped him to bear eloquent witness to his transformation.

The young man became a passionate advocate of what it means to follow Jesus. Nobody would have expected it of him. The authorities patronisingly asked his parents to speak for him, just as people still do patronise disabled people as if they must be thick because they're in a wheel chair or whatever. There used to be a Radio 4 programme about disability issues called "Does he take sugar? precisely because that is what people say rather than talking to a disabled person directly. This young man defied all expectations by being more than equal to putting him on trial for the fact he'd been cured.

The desperation of the situation in Aleppo; the shallow self-centred materialism of British society may well seem intractable. They are just beyond anything being done about them; and certainly beyond our ability to be of any influence. Yet Jesus is with us transforming and equipping, commissioning us to be passionate advocates of a different way of living. And to model that way of living in the way we conduct our lives.

Amen.