

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity 2019 (6.10.19)

Nehemiah 5: 1 – 13; John chapter 9

Well, John chapter 9 probably counts as one of the longest New Testament lessons in the history of Evensong. Evensong is a service of the Word, so we do get some quite long readings, but the whole of John chapter 9 counts, by any standards, as a whopper. And it could give rise to a pretty lengthy sermon, too – but don't worry it's not going to. But it could because in just the opening few verses it opens up one of the hoariest of hoary chestnuts in the whole discipline of the Philosophy of Religion.

The disciples ask Jesus “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And there you have it: the question of suffering: how can a loving God allow innocent people to suffer? There have been whole books written about this! And none of them have really managed to square the circle. If only there were some golden bullet, some snappy formula, so that

when you're in the pub, and it's usually just at the point when you're raising a pint to your lips so it's left suspended tantalizingly close to giving sustenance but yet so far away; and someone says “What I don't understand is, if you believe in God, how does God allow suffering;” if only there were some snappy formula to slap down, QED, so you could get on and down your pint. But all the volumes that have been written don't give one.

And I'll tell you something else: Jesus isn't letting on either. He doesn't give an answer to the disciples' question. He just accepts that the world is a place full of mystery. And it's a place full of mystery that is shot through with miracle. Sometimes conditions just so align that that there is a miraculous moment of healing or wholeness or clarity or justice.

And so in the story, on the face of this reading's narrative, we have the alignment of the mud and the washing off of the mud and of Jesus' touching, all of

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which combine to create the perfect moment when this man's sight is restored; he's healed miraculously. And then there's all sorts of clever word play about having the sight of faith; about having your spiritual eyes opened through faith. Faith in Jesus creates the sort of spiritual alignment, not so that we live in a world without any suffering, or when anyone can be healed for the saying of a prayer, like putting a pound coin in a slot machine to get a can of coke delivered in the tray at the bottom; but the sort of alignment where there is what might be described as a peace beyond all understanding, or life in all its fullness, or a connectedness, or a sense of clarity.

John's Gospel is all about the invitation to recognise Jesus for who he is and the life changing potential that that recognition brings. It is an entirely positive message. It doesn't rely on knocking the opposition, because Jesus doesn't recognise any opposition. Faith in Jesus is not in competition for a share in the market place of salvation or righteousness. So we must not

say that faith in Jesus delivers us from darkness into his marvellous light *unlike those dreadful Pharisees*, because that isn't how it works.

You sometimes see a meme going round the internet and it says "If banner outside your church begins 'God hates . . .' it's time to change your church." God does not hate Jews. God does not hate Muslims. God does not hate gay people. God does not hate unmarried mothers. God does not hate people with tattoos. God does not hate anybody. And for every time there has been a banner or a placard saying "God hates . . ." we need to repent.

God simply meets us through Jesus to open our eyes to his love and his compassion through faith. He places a balm on our spiritual blindness and washes away our hatred and prejudice and suspicion so that just now and again then there is an alignment between our dispositions and his values and a miraculous outbreak of peace and justice. Amen.