

## **1 Samuel 16.1-13**

### **Samuel Anoints David**

The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

## **Ephesians 5.8-14**

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

'Sleeper, awake!

Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.'

## **John 9.1-41**

### **A Man Born Blind Receives Sight**

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

## **The Pharisees Investigate the Healing**

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

## **Spiritual Blindness**

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.

## Who Sinned?

We know don't we that so much that goes wrong in the world is because of the sinfulness of human beings. This last Sunday we remembered the gross act of evil violence at the mosques and we recognise that all around the world the pain and suffering caused by the inhumanity of human beings to one another is beyond belief. It is what it is. And tragically innocent people are all too often the victims. Much of the suffering we bring upon ourselves as a human race.

But there are other things that happen which are not caused by us. I remember refuting reporters after the earthquakes when they suggested that the quakes were an act of God. Of course not! They are the result of the planet doing what the planet does, as a dynamic part of the evolving universe. And disease, such as the pandemic amongst us now, is not an act of God. It is because we live and are part of a universe which is a dynamic living, breathing organism in which life and death are at its core.

Nevertheless we cannot get away from the nagging question - How come bad things happen to good people? That long reading from John about the man born blind is always very current. "Who sinned" and thus caused this to happen?: How can an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God allow totally undeserved suffering to exist in the world that we believe God both created and loves?

The question is a hardy perennial; it's been around since people started thinking about what it means to have only one God who is just, loving, and good. So far, we haven't come up with really satisfying answers, no nice, neat conclusions. But the question persists; it has to—to ask this is part of what it means to be a thinking human being. Things that happen must have a reason, an explanation—they have to make sense—if we're going to wrap our minds around them.

So, Jesus saw a man blind from his birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" There it is, that hunger for some explanation in the face of tragedy, pain, and suffering—especially tragedy, pain, and suffering that apparently make no sense, that we can neither understand nor justify.

We know about this. We know that much of our pain – and the pain in the world – is hard to understand. It's like the fate of the man born blind; it just happens. So, we all ask our own versions of "Who sinned, this

man or his parents?” We ask why there is so much pain; why people, especially good people, get sick or get hurt when it isn’t their fault. We ask why so many die so young. We wonder why families so often do not work out the way they should work out, the way everybody wants them to work out. We wonder about earthquakes and tsunamis. We wonder about a lot of things.

The disciples wanted to understand this tragedy – and with it, other tragedies. Sure, if the man had become blind because of his own carelessness, or if someone else had blinded him on purpose, then it would still be a tragedy, but it would make more sense; it would be easier to deal with. But that’s not what happened. So, the disciples ask.

One of the traditional answers in Jesus’ tradition had been that tragedies such as this are a case of God visiting the sins of the parents on the children. Both Numbers (14:18) and Deuteronomy (5:9) say this quite specifically, and it had become a common proverb: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” The parents sin, the children suffer. While this isn’t particularly reassuring, it is at least something; it does offer an explanation. It shows how God, who has to be a part of everything, could also be a part of this.

But there were problems with this answer. It just didn’t feel right. Many of the great thinkers in Israel’s tradition, notably the prophets Jeremiah (31:29) and Ezekiel (18:2), had flatly and very specifically denied this. They had insisted that God did not skip generations, that God treated people as individuals and not as heirs of someone else’s sin. So, there was a contradiction in the tradition. It was a puzzle.

By and by, some other rather ingenious teachers came up with an interesting alternative. Perhaps, they speculated, a child could sin while it was still in the womb. Being born blind would be punishment for that sin. Again, while this was a really weird explanation, it was at least some sort of answer. There was some justice to be found, some sense to all of it—even if it wasn’t good sense, even if it felt less right than the earlier answer.

So, when the disciples asked Jesus their question, they were asking Jesus to choose from the two standard, traditional answers to the ancient question of “Why?” They were asking for an answer to the ancient cry for meaning and justice.

It’s important to realize what Jesus does when he responds to this question. First, he rejects both options. He doesn’t answer the question

‘why?’ He doesn’t say, “No, that is not the reason, but this is.” Instead – and this is very different – Jesus refuses to make sense of this situation by explaining it in terms of either the divine will or human sin.

So, he rejects the explanation that bad things happen because the victims are bad, or because the devil makes them happen, or because people don’t have enough faith, or because they don’t pray correctly, or whatever explanations people had come up with before and have come up with since. Neither Jesus nor the Christian faith offers any clear, rational, sensible explanation of senseless suffering.

Instead, we’re left with the brute fact that we live in a world that really isn’t fair, a world that is marked by ambiguity and inconsistency, a world that is dangerous. We live in a world where tragedy happens for no apparent reason to people who absolutely do not deserve it. The point is not that if we just have enough faith then these questions won’t matter, or we’ll somehow understand without an answer. The questions do matter, but we will never understand to our satisfaction, and it doesn’t do any good to pretend otherwise.

But that’s not all Jesus says. Jesus says two more things. They are not answers to the question of “why,” and we make several important mistakes if we treat them like answers. The first is when Jesus says of the man born blind that through him, the works of God can be made manifest. That is, the place to look for God in this tragedy, or in any tragedy, is not at the front-end of it, causing it to happen. God won’t be found there, sitting in heaven, passing out cancer cells, birth defects, earthquakes, strokes, car wrecks and blindness like some hideous dealer at a high-stakes cosmic poker game.

Instead, the place to find God is in the middle of the mess, in the very worst parts of it, working there to bring forth something new—not something that fixes the mess, but something that redeems and transforms it. The God who is found there – the God who is active there – is the God who has wounds on his hands and feet and side. It’s the God who knows, who cares, who remembers what suffering is like—the God who shares our suffering and pain and who takes it into himself in the vastness of his compassion and love.

Remember, this is not an explanation of what happens. God didn’t poke the man’s eyes out before he was born, so he would be handy for Jesus to use as a sermon illustration. That’s not the point. Instead, the point is that God can be found in very real ways, even in transforming ways, in

the very heart of undeserved and inexplicable pain. That's the very nature of Love. And that's the first thing Jesus says.

The second thing Jesus says is this: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day." Notice that Jesus says "We." We must work the works of God. Tragedy, pain, and suffering are also calls to ministry and to service. This may or may not be a call to fix whatever the problem is – often, we simply cannot do that – but it is always a call to reach out and to care. It is always a call to discover, to bring, and to share the presence of God in the heart of the tragedy.

And that this isn't an explanation, either. Terrible things don't happen so that we can have an opportunity to minister and serve. God doesn't work that way, either. But the call to such ministry and service is part of Jesus' response to the reality of tragedy and suffering—not a rationale or a justification for them.

These two things are what Jesus says to the question "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They're also the way Jesus responds to our cries for explanations.

For us Christians, what makes sense out of the world's and our suffering is not answers or explanations. Instead, what makes sense out of these is the presence of a God of compassion and love, along with the opportunity to serve. What makes sense out of tragedy is not that we understand it. Instead, it's that God has taken it upon himself, and that God is present in it and through it, and that God calls us to love him, and to serve him, and to find him, in our own pain and in that of our brothers and sisters.

This isn't the explanation we ask for; it almost certainly isn't the answer we want. Still, it's the truth. It's honest. And it promises that we matter, that our service and care are important. It promises that we are never alone, never forsaken. God is indeed with us, even in the very heart of the very worst. And that, finally, is enough.