

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Seeing Jesus – John 9:1-41 – New Sight

The previous sign in John's gospel – the feeding of the multitude – is found in chapter 6. Not until chapter 9 (unless we count Jesus walking on the water, in 6:16-24) do we come to the next sign – the healing of the man born blind. What lies between in chapters 7 and 8 is important, because they provide the *setting* for the miracle and what follows. And that's the first thing we need to think about...

1. The Setting

It's clear that John is interested in the Jewish feasts; quite a bit of the action in his gospel takes place during festivals. In chapter 2, for instance, Jesus is in Jerusalem at *Passover* time (2:13, 23), and it's Passover in chapter 6 too (6:4). At Passover, the people remembered the time when God delivered their ancestors out of Egypt. It was an important date in the Jewish calendar, because it was right at the heart of their identity as the people God had saved for himself.

And then, at the start of chapter 7, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for *another* feast, the feast of Tabernacles (see 7:1-13). We came across the feast of Tabernacles in our studies in Ezra and Nehemiah. When the people come back from exile, the first thing they do (in Ezra 3) is build the altar, so they can offer sacrifices again. And then the next thing they do is celebrate the feast of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:4-6). They celebrate it again in Nehemiah 8 (Nehemiah 8:13-17). Tabernacles reminded them of the period in their history when their ancestors wandered in the wilderness, dwelling in tents. So, for seven days during the feast, they lived in tents or make-shift shelters, remembering how their ancestors lived in the wilderness. It was an annual reminder of how God rescued them from captivity and remained faithful to them.

So, the feast mentioned in 7:37 is Tabernacles. Every morning during the feast there would have been a procession to a fountain which supplied water for the pool of Siloam. Here

the priest would fill his pitcher with water. Then the crowd would make its way to the temple, singing and waving branches as a reminder of the huts their ancestors had made in the wilderness. The priest would go to the altar at the time of sacrifice and pour out the water. That looked *back*, as a reminder, to the times when God had provided water for the people in the wilderness. But the pouring of water also looked *forward* to the future messianic age, described in Ezekiel 47, when a stream would flow from the temple and bring life to the whole land. It may well have been that just as they were pouring water, Jesus stood and shouted these words – 7:37-38. Jesus is making it clear that *he* is the fulfilment of all that the feast of Tabernacles looked back to *and* looked forward to. He is the one who can provide the waters they long for. They need to come to him to drink!

And if Jesus makes that claim about *water* at Tabernacles, he makes it with *light* as well, which was also significant for the feast. During Tabernacles, lamps were set up in the temple, picturing the pillar of fire which led the people through the wilderness. And it's in that context that Jesus says what he says in 8:12 – 'I am the light of the world'. And he says it again in 9:5. Jesus is the fulfilment of the feast of Tabernacles both in the water that he supplies and in the light that he brings. So, just as 'I am the bread of life' is highly significant for those celebrating Passover (in John 6), so 'I am the light of the world' is significant for those celebrating Tabernacles (in John 8). That's the setting for chapter 9.

And so we come to the sign itself...

2. The Sign

Jesus shows by the feeding of the multitude that he is the bread of life, and now he shows he is the light of the world by healing the man born blind. Let's have a brief look through the story.

(a) The healing (9:1-7)

The healing is described quite briefly in 9:1-7. While the disciples are looking for the cause of the man's suffering, Jesus is looking for how God's work might be displayed. And, in a way that remind us of how God creates Adam in Genesis 2, Jesus spits on the ground and makes clay for the man's eyes, and sends him to the pool where he is to wash himself. When he does so, he can see. How amazing would that have been!

(b) The hearing (9:8-41)

But what follows the healing is what we might think of as a *hearing*, or a trial, where we have a series of interrogations between different sets of people.

- *The man and his neighbours* (9:8-12). The man gives a concise witness statement of what happened.
- *The man and the Pharisees* (9:13-17). His neighbours send him to the Pharisees, some of whom were angry because Jesus had healed on the sabbath.
- *The Pharisees and the man's parents* (9:18-23). So, they interview the parents. And they appear to be a little cagey in their testimony – understandably so, perhaps, because they're nervous about being thrown out of the synagogue, about being ostracised; so they say: 'he's of age... ask him!' So, they do...
- *The man and the Pharisees* (9:24-34). Now comes the inquisition! But the man shows amazing spirit: 'the one thing I do know; I was blind but now I see. I can't answer all your questions; but I was once in the dark and now I've come into the light, I was lost and now I'm found.' I think we're meant to understand that he gets sarcastic with them in 9:27: 'You're theological big-wigs who know everything, don't you... all those initials after your name... all those books... and you don't know who he is... do you want to follow him too?'
- *The man and Jesus* (9:35-38). This is one the precious private conversations John records for us in his gospel. They've thrown this man

out of the synagogue, but Jesus finds him; and the man comes to *see* Jesus and *believe* in him.

- *Jesus and the Pharisees* (9:39-41). The chapter ends with Jesus turning the tables on those who have been conducting the hearing by putting *them* on trial and by declaring *them* guilty!

3. The Significance

The signs point away from themselves. They are signs which have *significance*. So, what are some of the significances of this one? We'll look at three...

(a) The importance of light

It's perhaps become easy for us who live in the UK to take light for granted. But even I can remember growing up in Liverpool in the 1960s and 1970s when power cuts happened fairly regularly, and my parents had to fumble around in the darkness looking for candles! And of course, there are lots of places in the world with no electricity where when it's dark, it's dark – that's it until the morning! It's only when we feel the power of darkness that we really begin to appreciate the importance of light.

Light is a favourite theme of John. He begins with it in chapter 1: in the word was life, and that life was the *light* of the human race (1:4); the light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not mastered it (1:5). In chapter 3, John says that some people walk in darkness because they don't want to come into the light (3:19-21). For John, to live a life without Christ is to live in darkness, in blindness. But if the world is in darkness and stands under judgment, Jesus says he is the light of the world. He shines his light into our darkness.

And light is important elsewhere in the Bible too. It's there on the very first page, in Genesis 1, where God says, 'Let there be light, and there was' (Genesis 1:3). God is creator and giver of light, and God himself on occasion is described as being 'light' (Psalm 27:1; Isaiah 60:19). The *law* of God is said to be like a light for our path (Psalm 119:105). Israel as a whole was called to shine God's light to the nations (see Isaiah 60:1-3). And God promised through

Isaiah that there would be one, his servant, who would be God's light to the world (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 53:1-12; 60:1-3). Jesus appears to be taking on himself the role of this individual, this servant of the Lord, the one who would be the light of the world, and would shine in the darkness, bringing light and life to all who would believe.

(b) The necessity of faith

Towards the end of the chapter, when Jesus hears the man has been thrown out of the synagogue, he finds the man and asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The man confesses, 'Lord, I believe', and *worships* Jesus (9:38). He has been thrown out of the synagogue and lost his place of worship. But Jesus meets him, and restores his worship by giving him *spiritual* sight to match his physical sight. And, as he bows in worship of Jesus, he not only believes, but also worships the one who is the light of the world.

His belief comes gradually. We saw this with the nobleman in chapter 4, who begins with a *crisis* faith, and moves to a *confident* faith and then a *confirmed* faith in Jesus; this man too doesn't see very much to begin with. In 9:11, he refers to him as 'the man they call Jesus'; in 9:17, he calls Jesus a 'prophet'; in 9:33, he says Jesus is from God; and then in 9:38, he believes and worships Jesus.

Remember: this is why John wrote his gospel – so that people might see Jesus, and believe in him, and have life. And once again we have to answer the challenge from John: do we believe in Jesus? And more than that, do we worship Jesus? Are we loving him our heart and our will and our mind and our strength?

(c) The danger of judgment

The chapter begins with a question about judgment (9:2), and it ends with a statement about judgment (9:39). The Pharisees ask, 'Are we also blind?' (9:40).

They are assuming, of course, that they are *not* blind; but Jesus says that while the blind man has been brought to sight, ironically *they* are the ones who are in the dark; they are the real blind ones! Although they are the ones who have been doing the judging in this trial, they are the ones who will be judged. The man knew himself to be blind and in need of sight, whereas the Pharisees, though spiritually blind, claimed to be able to see.

What we learn from the debate that goes on in this chapter, is that often when people reject Jesus, it's not a matter of their intellect, but of their *will*. It's not that they can't believe, it's that they *won't* believe, or *don't want* to believe. They weren't wanting to find out who Jesus was. They were just looking for enough rope to hang him.

Why were the signs given? So that we might believe. But they are double edged; they draw some people, and drive others away. The light attracts some, but repels others. We sometimes imagine that if only people could hear the gospel clearly they would understand and believe Jesus. But that wouldn't necessarily be the case. The Bible tells us that our natural inclination is to reject Jesus; as human beings, that's where we are by default. We shouldn't be surprised if our friends or members of our family don't embrace the Christian faith. And the passage ends by reminding us that those who do not believe, who reject the light, remain in their guilt (9:41). Those are serious words...

But their very seriousness drives us back to Jesus again, to the only one who can give us new sight, to believe in him, and to worship him, with all our heart. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 18 March 2007