

“Love is the eye”

I Samuel 16. 1-7; John 9. 1-41

Trinity Reformed Church, Sunday 3 April 2011

One of the great things about travelling is that you learn to see with new eyes. Well, there is so much to see. We live in different places, and the architecture, the rhythms of life, what's familiar, what's novel ... our eyes are opened as we encounter the other. Thank you so much for welcoming me here. I know I shall be refreshed for my service in Scotland, but I hope I may serve you here too – that together we shall have an experience of seeing things with new eyes.

There is something exciting about seeing with new eyes. That's our way into the reading in John ch.9. Those of you who have had, say, cataract surgery may have an inkling of what it is like for the key character in our reading – when the world suddenly came into focus in a new way – but even then we would be none of us quite where he was. He had been blind from birth. For him to be given sight, for him literally to have his eyes opened, well it was, as he put it himself, something that had never been done “since the world began” (v.32). As in the book of Genesis, new life was brought out of the dirt of the ground. And so as a blind man got his sight through the grace and power of Jesus, for us being told the story, other connections are opened up. As Jesus put it, the point was (v.39), that “those who do not see may see”. Jesus Christ can take a soul from stumbling around in darkness into walking in the light. In this story, the man who at first knew Jesus as just “a man called Jesus” moves into realising that he was (v.17) “a prophet”, (v.33) a man “from God”, (v.38) the one to be worshipped and adored. The beauty of this story is that as it unfolds we learn of his growth, his delight, his great wisdom, his grasp of truth. All this is for anyone touched by the grace and power of Christ. “Those who do not see may see”. You and I may delight, may become wise, may receive grace and truth from God Himself. And then the world will look very different.

Jesus came that we might come to the light, he being the “light of the world”. Life is to be lived not looking down, but looking up. We are not just lives which go dust to dust. And our light may shine, that others may glorify our Father in heaven. Well, I could tie up all sorts of ideas with today's reading, but let me stick with what particularly Jesus had to stick in about; what every telling of the gospel has to be aware of, what every shaping of Christian life has to be realistic about, what every churchgoer, i.e. those of us who know our Bibles a bit have to be wary of. I mean, let's recognise what all can go wrong, what too readily goes wrong especially around our seeing. Understand how we fall short in our seeing.

There is, running through the whole of this chapter 9, a rather grim counter-story. Jesus comes along (v.1), as the reading puts it, comes along out of the blue to bring a rescue from life that is harsh and dead-end. But no sooner does he start acting with mercy than people begin to grudge it. Instead of folk thinking, wow, this is world-shatteringly wonderful that the Saviour of the world kneels down in the dirt to extend love and compassion, we read that “they” thought it was a bit reckless. A bit too generous surely. And not on the right day either. And was that the right person to help, one of these scroungers? A beggar is a dirty term. So, for a large part of our reading today, Jesus is sidelined. That's why we used two readers, I hope you noticed. Jesus is there at the beginning and there at the end, but in the

middle, the large middle, there's lots and lots of talk just keeping him out of it. There are questions being asked; there's pettiness; there's a dragging in of other folk into the interrogation of the poor man whose sight had been restored. There's nastiness, there are heated arguments, there are preconceptions, there are grand dogmatic statements, there are flags flown for this party as opposed to that, there is ... well, scarily, it sounds to be honest like church can be at its worst. When there may be quite a lot of heat, but not a lot of light; when Jesus is not in the room. We will sometimes just go at one another. We readily come out with dreadful statements like "he got what he deserved" – he drank too much, he ate too much, she talks too much, she bugs me: as if I get it all right...! The counter-story, the all too dominant counter-story, is that we're too good at bitching and judging and complaining and condemning: losing the plot as far as the mercy of God is concerned. The novelist Anais Nin wrote perceptively, "We do not see things as they are; we see as we are". And the trouble is, we are not that nice. And the more we believe, really believe in the way we see things, the more un-niceness there is. The more I love the sound of my own voice, the more I love *myself as opposed to others*, the more capacity I build up to pile the dirt on to others – well, let's face it, doing the dirty, piling on the dirt, these are not, as figures of speech, pictures of healing and love.

John's gospel is pushing us to think about this. John's gospel is pushing us to think about how much we love the light, or how much we prefer the darkness; who the Lord of our life is, who the Saviour of the world is. Is it Jesus Christ or is it, in my heart of hearts, really me? Do I rejoice at every touch of mercy and compassion, or would I rather be the arbiter of those whom I feel "deserve" mercy? That's the cutting edge of today's reading - religious folk like you and me needing to be transformed; Christ needing to live in us, so that how God works may be celebrated.

I saw a very thoughtful poem by Yehuda Amichai: From the place where we are right / Flowers will never grow / In the spring. / The place where we are right / Is hard and trampled / Like a yard. Where we are right, be very careful. Healing won't come there. Salvation does not come from there. Jesus said, "I came that those who "do see" may become blind. The fact is, then sin remains. Only by the mercy and compassion of God, only by the mercy of Christ deeply taking us over, will our lives blossom. Jesus on the cross, Jesus who died for us "while we were yet sinners": there is how much mercy and compassion we are to believe in.

Here's a one-liner, the title of my sermon: "Love is the eye". It's a quotation I think of someone who happens to be Scottish, 850 years ago, a monk whose name was Richard. "Love is the eye", he wrote, "and to love is to see" (*amor oculus est, et amare est videre*). Love only of yourself and your world and what is precious to you and the way you see things – well, is that seeing, is that living in God's world, is it love indeed? I'm hearing Richard of St Victor saying, through Christ's way of seeing let your heart go out to God and let your heart therefore go out to others: for that is the way to see, that is the way to live. Jesus, here in this passage and so often, he sees – he sees the person needing love. Seeing, he loves; and loving, he sees. He saw this man blind from birth; and at the end, when the man had been driven out from the company, Jesus went looking for him. That formerly blind man was asked, do you believe in the Son of Man / the Son of God. Let me see him, says the

man. You're looking at him, says Jesus. And how the man loved Jesus! He worshipped him (v.38). Love is the eye.

I found myself recalling the first letter of John, and the powerful writing there about love. I John 2. 9: "Whoever says 'I am in the light', while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness"; I John 4.20: "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen". Walking in the light or being lost in darkness? Love is the eye. May we learn to see always (always!) with love.

The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

<http://daysofawe.net/shebotzodkim.htm>

Yehuda Amichai (May 3, 1924 – September 22, 2000) was an Israeli poet. Amichai is considered by many, both in Israel and internationally, as Israel's greatest modern poet.

Sermon Preached at Trinity Reformed Church, by the Rev. Peter Donald on April 3, 2011.