

Signposts in John: *Sight in the darkness*

There are so many things that could be said about this chapter from John's Gospel, so many themes to draw out, that I hardly know where to start!!

It's said of John's Gospel that it's a gospel in which it's shallow enough to paddle, yet deep enough to swim. In other words it's possible to engage with it, to understand it, on a number of levels, at a range of different depths as is appropriate for understanding and maturity.

You know how certain phrases that you hear stick with you, often for many years?? Well one of the phrases that has stuck with me from teacher training was the term 'the ecosystem of the classroom'. Most of it I reckon was actually a load of theorising from lecturers who hadn't actually taught in school for years, but the idea of the classroom having its own ecosystem, its own self-contained environment was one that struck a chord with me (for whatever reason) and that I've remembered for a number of years. And this particular lecturer reckoned it was possible to look at what was happening in a classroom at any given time and work out why by looking at the 'ecosystem' on a number of levels. He talked about peeling back the layers. What, as you looked around, immediately struck you. Did everything look calm, were the pupils getting on with the task they'd been given? Or was it complete anarchy? That was what was happening on the surface.

But then by peeling back a layer as he called it, looking deeper, it was possible (he thought) to find the reasons for that calmness or anarchy. Were the tasks appropriate. Had they been well explained, had they been well matched to the pupils' ability. What had gone on before. Then down another layer – looking at the personality of the teacher, whether the pupils were encouraged to be independent, the structure of planning, the affect of senior management on the teacher, etc etc.

John's gospel is crammed full of things happening on different levels, at different depths. And what we see depends largely on how deeply we care to look. It's simple isn't possible to pick up everything. Every nuance.

The signs are no exception. They're loaded with significance and meaning on all kinds of levels.

And this sign of Jesus healing the man born blind (the sixth out of seven that occur in the gospel) has lots going on at different levels.

I've set out this morning to do two things

1. To paddle, to look at the sign from the surface and
2. to swim, to look at it more deeply

Recap of signs.

A quick recap of the signs (or miracles) so far.

The first is where Jesus attends the wedding at Cana and the wine runs out. He turns water into wine.

The second is the healing of the official's son that John Atkinson spoke on, the third is the healing at the pool that Douglas spoke on,

the fourth is the feeding of the five thousand that was the theme for our all-age worship a couple of weeks ago.

The fifth is walking on water

and we're up to the sixth today.

The final one next week is the raising of Lazarus.

All these signs point towards who Jesus is. They were signposts for the people at the time, and they're signposts for us today. Douglas looked at how signposts help us a couple of weeks ago because they draw our attention to something. And as we move through these signs (these miracles) we are increasingly having our attention drawn to who Jesus is. The signs are increasingly pointing to who he is. The picture is building all the time, with more and more indications for us.

Tension/conflict

But it's not just the picture of Jesus that is building in the disciples minds and ours as these signs continue. There is tension and conflict building too. Tension with the authorities, with the Pharisees, with the Jews. This is the point in the gospel where we find that conflict had become so great between Jews and Jesus' followers that to declare yourself a follower of this Jesus meant excommunication from the synagogue. And that didn't just mean you couldn't go to worship anymore, it meant that your whole social structure collapsed. To admit to being a follower of Jesus was committing social suicide.

Read (John 9:20-22 & 34).

Paddle

So first of all lets paddle in the shallows (doesn't mean that the message is shallow or unimportant) More that it's the top layer.

Here is a man who we learn has been blind since birth. He's never known anything different. And the disciples draw attention to this man because they're interested to hear Jesus' answer to a question about the relationship between sin and suffering.

Rabbi, who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind.

Hang on says Jesus - No one sinned to cause this man's suffering. It wasn't anybody's fault.

The assumption that because this man is blind at birth, he must have done something wrong to deserve it, or maybe his parents had was a common view at the time.

And it still is in a way too today. If someone suffers, then we want instant answers. 'what did I do to deserve that?'

Suffering *can* be the result of wrongdoing. If you sleep around, then don't be surprised if you contract a sexual disease. If you drink and drive, don't be surprised if you have an accident. But those are the exceptions.

The Bible makes it clear suffering does not usually work in that way. Rather it is part of the sad fact of living in a world out of kilter with its creator. Sin has entered the world, and the whole thing is broken. So suffering is a fact of living in a sinful world, but it is not necessarily tied to any particular thing we have done.

Life isn't one big moral slot machine. Good works in the top slot, rewards dropping into the bottom tray. Or bad actions in at the top, disaster coming out the bottom. We know that it just doesn't happen like that. Good things happen to those who live lawless, immoral lives, and bad things happen to those who devote their lives to good causes.

And then without being asked to, Jesus heals the man by making a mud paste and putting it on his eyes, before sending him to a particular pool to wash it off.

When the man comes back people aren't even sure if it's him or not, such has been the transformation.

At the point of healing everything changes for that man. His physical state – his ability to receive light and colour and images for his brain to interpret. His understanding of the world, his ability to see what everyone else can. His status – no longer needing to be dependent on others for many things. His prospects – the potential to work and earn and be self-supporting

A year after the Omagh bombing there was a documentary following some of those whose lives had changed dramatically as a result of either losing loved ones, or by being injured themselves in the blast. One was a 14 year old girl who had lost her sight. And when interviewed she talked heartbreakingly about her 'dark days' and how her world had closed down. Dark days in the physical sense as she could no longer see, but dark too in terms of her mood and expectations and hope for the future and accessibility to the world.

She had the opposite experience of the man born blind. In one moment her world was closed down. For the man born blind in an instant his was opened up. Utterly transformed.

And if John wants this healing to act as a signpost to who Jesus is, he couldn't really be giving us a clearer sign. Look, says the signpost. 'Here is someone who transforms lives. Who opens up our potential.' An encounter with Jesus means things will never be the same again.

Seeing the light

This healing points to the power and authority that Jesus has in God. It's one of those moments as Tom Wright says when heaven is opened, when the transforming power of God's love bursts into the present world.

It wouldn't be outside of John's remit to say that he would like the reader of his gospel (so that means us too) to interpret this coming to sight, to seeing the light, as a picture of our turning to Christ. A moving from darkness (our sinfulness) to light. In fact we talk about 'seeing the light' to mean something making sense or of someone coming to faith.

And those of us here this morning who have turned to Christ know that in that moment *our* life was transformed. Our potential was released. All that held us back was gone.

About 7 or 8 years ago at the height of the friends reunited frenzy I made contact with a friend from primary school who I hadn't seen or heard of for 20 years. If you've never heard of Friends reunited it's a website where you post details about yourself and hopefully make contact with people from school, or old work places, or teams. It has since been eclipsed by Facebook. Anyway, I emailed Joanne, it turned out she was living not far away in Nottingham, and we agreed to meet up. When she came to my house I opened the door and let in this complete stranger. Here was someone who had turned up at my door at the exact time we had agreed and yet I didn't know if it was Joanne or not. She looked really different. She used to have dark curly hair, but this woman was blond. She sounded really different. She used to be a mackem with a strong Sunderland accent, but now she sounded clearly as if she was from the east Midlands. It was only the fact that we'd agreed to meet at that time, at that place, that made me sure it was her.

Following his encounter with Jesus, the blind man's friends didn't recognise him. When we come into the light (meet with Jesus) we are transformed, changed beyond recognition. We are as Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth 'New creations'

I said that we would paddle and then swim.

I guess we've paddled, begun to wade as we've gone a bit deeper, and now its time to go a bit further under the surface and to swim.

Swim

The passage from Isaiah that I read earlier reminds us that giving sight to the blind was one of the marks of the coming of the messianic age. It was something that would signal to the Jews that the messiah had arrived. (Out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see). Isaiah 29v18

Jesus' healing of the man born blind was a clear signpost to the Jews that Jesus was claiming that messiahship. He was saying in effect 'look! I'm ushering in the messianic age. I'm the one.

Everything is changing.

I talked earlier about the signposts pointing increasingly to build a picture of who Jesus was and is. The opposition was building with each subsequent sign too, and restoring sight was a sure fire way of getting the Pharisees backs up, of increasing the opposition. Jesus no doubt was clear about what he was doing, and John is clear in the way he presents this to us that he understood the significance of giving someone sight.

Light/dark

Under the surface is the theme of light and dark. Not only does Jesus allow the man to see light, but Jesus IS the light. He refers back to the I am: 'I am the light of the world' and many people hear an echo too with the prologue where John writes 'The light shines in the darkness. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world'

And it isn't just the man born blind who can now see, who has light coming to his eyes. It's the disciples, and it is John's readers who are being led towards the light, which is Jesus himself.

Light does two things. It illuminates, and it reveals the dark places, the shadows where the light doesn't get to. When everything is completely dark there *are* no shadows. Turn on the light and shadowy corners are revealed.

On a deeper, under the surface level, this sign is as much about showing up the shadows as it is about proclaiming the light. And that is because of the reaction of the Pharisees. (Read on in chapter 9 later if you have the opportunity)

The light has exposed them. Now Jesus has come it is possible to see how mixed up religion has become, how confused and wrong- tracked many of the practices are, how hypocritical and law bound the Pharisees are.

As the Lord says through Isaiah: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men'

Jesus coming reveals the religious practices of the day to be shadowy – a far cry from what God intended.

3 things for us

So what does all this talk about light and dark have to do with us?

Three things I think. The first is this: If you haven't yet come to Jesus then come, be transformed. Allow his light to change you beyond recognition.

Second. Ask ourselves 'What has the light revealed?' Are there any dark shadows & if so where? The Pharisees were devout people, following God as they thought appropriate. But Jesus revealed that they had gone horribly off track.

We need always to be alert to the possibility that we might have gone off track. That the things we are doing in Jesus' name are not the things God is requiring of us.

Let the light shine – what does it show up?

And finally, think for a minute of a projector lens. When it is pristine, first taken out of the box, bright light shines onto screen. Over time the lens collects bits of dust and fluff from the atmosphere around. These bits land on the lens & then are projected as blobs onto the screen.

Over time we collect bits and bobs of dust and dirt from the world around us that mean we're not projecting as clearly as we should. The light of Christ isn't able to shine as clearly as it once did.

In a few moments we have opportunity to have the lens wiped clean, to return it to shining a clear light, as we meet with Jesus around his table. As we ask him again to be our light in the world.

John Newton, the 18th century slave trader, who fearing for his life during a storm at sea, turned to the light of Christ, sums it up with his famous words:

Amazing grace. How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see.

House Group Notes 15th February 2009
Signposts in John: Sight in the darkness
Isaiah 29:13-18 John Chapter 9

The seven signs in John's gospel point towards who Jesus is. They were signposts for the people at the time, and they're signposts for us today. The picture is building all the time, but also the opposition to Jesus. By the time we reach this sixth sign opposition from the authorities is so great that following Jesus results in excommunication from the synagogue.

The disciples draw attention to the man born blind because they're interested to hear Jesus' answer to a question about the relationship between sin and suffering. No one sinned to cause this man's suffering, says Jesus. It wasn't anybody's fault.

Without being asked to, Jesus heals the man by making a mud paste and putting it on his eyes, before sending him to a particular pool to wash it off. When the man comes back people aren't even sure if it's him or not, such has been the transformation. Everything changes for him - physical state, understanding, status, prospects. An encounter with Jesus means nothing will ever be the same again. Paul describes it as becoming a 'new creation'.

The passage from Isaiah reminds us that giving sight to the blind was one of the marks of the coming of the messianic age. (Isaiah 29v18) Jesus' healing of the man born blind was a clear signpost to the Jews that Jesus was claiming that messiahship.

Under the surface is the theme of light and dark. Not only does Jesus allow the man to see light, but Jesus IS the light. He refers back to the I am: 'I am the light of the world' and many people hear an echo too with the prologue where John writes 'The light shines in the darkness. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world'.

Light does two things. It illuminates, and it reveals the dark places, the shadows where the light doesn't get to. This sixth sign is as much about showing up the shadows as it is about proclaiming the light. And that is because of the reaction of the Pharisees. The light has exposed them. Now Jesus has come it is possible to see how mixed up religion has become, how confused and wrong-tracked many of the practices are, how hypocritical and law bound the Pharisees are. As the Lord says through Isaiah: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men' (Is 29)

John Newton, the 18th century slave trader, upon turning to the light of Christ, summed up the theme with famous words: 'Amazing grace. How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see.'

- Jesus says to the disciples that the man's sin and suffering are not linked. In what ways do we link them? What is your understanding of suffering?
- In what ways has faith in Jesus caused transformation in your life? How are you a 'new creation'?
- How does this sixth sign point to Jesus as the Messiah?
- Can you think of some examples of Jesus' light revealing dark places/practices? What can we do to guard against Pharisaic religion?