

Give me light

John 9:1-41; Psalm 23

Rev Jean Shannon

Call me crazy but I am going to jump straight in and talk about sin.¹

That's what John does in the first 2 lines of this story...and in the last 2 lines – so that's where I'm going.

But first, I will take you back to the beginning – Genesis and Jesus' temptation in the desert. If you'll remember – we talked about 'tests' – that is what temptation is – a test. In the garden, the test might have been 'are you grown up enough to take responsibility for your decisions?' In the desert, it was 'can you act on what you believe?' Or something like 'How do your beliefs stand up in the 'real' world?'

Every human being seems to have a different idea of sin so just so we are on the same page, I'm going to talk about mine. (No stones please) no, not my sins, we don't have time – how I would define sin.

Sin is not the same as evil. Sin is not the difference between good and bad. Sin is knowing something is wrong, just wrong...(pause) and doing it anyway. I don't mean going against the rules because there are times when you must break the rules to do something right. I mean you know its naughty *but* you do it anyway.

Garrison Keilor tells a story called "Tomato Butt". His mom sent him and his sister out into the autumn sunshine to pick the last of the tomatoes. You know, the ones still green and the ones over-ripe that you use for bottling and sauces. The over-ripe ones are disgusting and falling apart. Anyway, they got to the vegie patch which was farm-yard size...and for a while worked diligently. At some moment, the young Garrison looked up at his sister bent over in the row in front of him and all he could see was her rear end. He looked at her...and he felt the large, soft tomato in his hand.... And well, you know the rest of the story.

We are born with temptation it is what we do with it that counts.

I once explained original sin as you know when the cat jumps up on the edge of your bath and you think (making the sign of a poke) – all it would take, is...let's not go there.

John starts this story with Jesus immediately dismissing the idea that this man's blindness is a result of his sin or his parents. This was in direct conflict with the

¹ That got your attention.

thinking of the day.² In fact, he equates blindness with innocence. It is the lack of knowledge. When we know something, when we understand, we can make decisions.

Once again, we see John using the metaphor of light and dark, blindness and seeing. The light that shines in the darkness and the darkness that cannot overcome the light.

Leonard Cohen wrote an anthem that has the refrain:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Not to say, there was a perfect order to everything but most people understood 'the rules' and the punishment for not accepting the status quo was being thrown out of the synagogue. It's more than not being allowed to worship. It is being thrown out of society, commercially, spiritually and in relationship with your community. People would not buy your goods or marry your children. Even your heritage will be erased. You are no longer a branch of the tree.

(just as an aside – given God's mission of connection³ – surely this is a sin?)

Here we have a dramatic story with characters we recognise and so they challenge us. At any stage, we could be any one of them. There is: the blind man who gains his sight and amongst pressure and rejection, also gains his faith; the curious and meddling neighbours; the accusing pharisees who set themselves as the authorities on everything; and the intimidated parents who fear the truth and consequences.

The religious authorities are sure Jesus is a sinner but in the end, through their judgemental behaviour, through their rigid thinking, they are named as sinners – because they are NOT blind, as in innocent, but blinded by the belief in their knowledge. The blind man admits to ignorance but sticks to his experience. His faith leads to worship – not the other way around.

Certainty – maybe in some cases – that's a sin.

² Interesting that later church teachings right up through the pilgrims and to today, there are churches that believe affliction is caused by sin – somebody's somewhere.

³ Reconciliation of all things

Note that Jesus reappears as the blind man is cast out, people cast out of religion have found faith outside the bounds of 'church'. Jesus scooping up the people on the edge – once again⁴. Jesus' reappearance at the end of the story brings that defiant hope we talked about last week. His mission to the unwanted and those who felt 'unworthy'. He brought light where there was darkness.

Maybe handing your responsibility over is also a sin. What about the blind man's parents – they were quick to throw him under the bus. Yes, they were afraid but they knew what they were doing.

Sometimes when we turn to religious authorities or even God for all the answers, we are simply abdicating our responsibility. And worse, subject to the same kind of unconscious bias we talked about last week.

There are occasions when the thoughts that seem to come from God are not answers at all. They prove to be well-intentioned unconscious rationalisations. We have grown up in a world of beseeching prayer. We've been told 'take it to God' and that's not a bad thing.

But...there is a pitfall. Remember God gave us reason for a reason.⁵ There is always the possibility that our own wishful thinking; and the human tendency to rationalise just about anything, might distort our so-called guidance. With the best of intentions, this can lead some people to force their own will into all sorts of situations with the comfortable assurance that they are acting under God's specific direction. Under such an illusion, anyone can create chaos and harm without intending it. To honour my uncertainty, I'm giving the pharisees the benefit of the doubt.

I am one who believes that there is a place for beseech and a place for silence: a place to sit quietly in the dark. The more you talk – the less you can listen. It is true, we are somewhat powerless in the dark. Perhaps, for Lent, we need to give up power; give up beseeching and sit in the silence; sit in the dark and wait for the light to get in.

I'll finish on an obscure and unresolved controversy about the last line in the 23rd psalm. We say, in the English translation, "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

⁴ Which is what calls people to be Deacons

⁵ The Greek word used in John 1:1 and 1:14 is logos. (From this word, we get the English words logic and logical, and the suffix -ology, as in geology, biology, etc.) In Greek philosophy, the logos was considered to be the rational principle in accordance with which the whole creation had come into existence. (Rev Dr John Squires)

forever (or for the rest of my days)". Some scholars, reading Hebrew translations – read this as: I shall **return** to the house of the Lord for the rest of my days.

Neither side are certain. Sometimes we just see what we want to see. Sometimes, in the darkness, we see best.

Lord, for this Lent, as I jettison the noise that fills me up, let me sit in the darkness, resting my head on the rock of uncertainty, listening to the nights silence – listening for you.