

REVEALING THE KINGDOM¹

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church,
King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 26 March 2017**

We are in the period of long gospel readings. Last week's had 36 verses, this week's 41, and next week will have 45. Only the readings of the Passion on Palm Sunday and Good Friday are longer. The length of today's gospel has not left much space for my sermon, which may be good or bad, depending on your point of view. It's bad for me because the reading that we have heard is one of the most important sections of John's gospel. He devotes a considerable space to it.

This gospel reading both reveals the kingdom of God and corrects our perceptions of it. It shows the true kingdom partly through what Jesus does and partly through the negative reactions of others. I want to make three relatively brief comments:

- On the use of difference as an excuse for exclusion;
- On the abuse of power; and
- To ask who sees the kingdom best.

The opening sentence of Chapter 9 sets the scene for what follows by a statement of the utmost importance. This is a story about a man who was born blind. Why is this so important? It is a question of identity. This man was never anything else apart from what he was when Jesus met him. It isn't that he was once something else and an event or disease made him blind. Blindness was an essential part of his identity from the start.

Immediately, Jesus' disciples ask him whether the blindness was the result of the sin of the man's parent or, amazingly, of his own sin. How he could have committed an intra-uterine sin is not explained. This is a question about how this man can be excluded. If he bears the obvious marks of sin, he can be excluded from both civil and religious society.

The response that Jesus makes is both direct and oblique. He first specifically denies that anyone's sin is involved here. Because the disciples' question is based on a general assumption, Jesus' response has general application. It is a major and direct statement about people's physical conditions; they are not punishment for sins. The next bit is a little opaque. Jesus says, "... he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me."

Does this mean that God deliberately made this man blind so that he could be a demonstration piece for the miraculous powers that Jesus has? I don't think so. This also is a statement of general application. Jesus is saying is that this man, blind as he is, can exhibit God's works as well as any sighted person. His condition does not exclude him from acting for God. Jesus confirms this by saying that we all must do God's works; those of us who imagine ourselves whole and normal and those of us who have a different identity.

We should not underestimate the significance of this statement in our present context. It illuminates our view of differences of all kinds, of identities of all kinds. It says plainly that difference is not a reason for exclusion from the kingdom. Because the greater includes the less, we have no justification for such exclusions from our religious and civil societies either.

¹ Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

The reactions to the healing of the blind man are very nasty. Apart from the general scepticism of his neighbours, the matter comes to the attention of the authorities whose right to accept or exclude people is challenged. Everyone is now afraid. The man's parents try to duck out. They suggest that all questions be asked of their son. The stakes are high, everyone can be excluded now. In actions typical of challenged authorities, threats are made.

Fortunately, the man himself is made of sterner stuff and answers the authorities back, giving more than he receives. He mocks the authorities but, in the end, he is cast out. The authorities, in their abuse of power, seem to have won. This abuse of power is clearly shown not to be of the kingdom. This action of self-protection is clearly shown not to be of the kingdom.

We live in an age of the abuse of power. We see it in ecclesiastical contexts as well as in civil contexts. Self-protection is the principal objective. This gospel says plainly that self-interest and the abuse of the powerless is not of the kingdom. Because the greater includes the less, we have no justification for such abuses in our religious and civil societies either.

These observations lead us naturally to my third point: who is it that recognises the kingdom? John sets out clearly the intention of this gospel reading in its final verses. Taken overall, the story of the man born blind and his healing by Jesus, is seen by John as an allegory contrasting spiritual and physical blindness with physical and spiritual sight. Put bluntly, the physically blind man is spiritually sighted and the physically sighted authorities are spiritually blind.

This conclusion is the reverse of what might have been expected and the reverse of what everyone wanted to be true. How can the excluded and the powerless and abused have the spiritually upper hand? This is not the only place in the gospels where this message is spelled out, but it is one of the most direct. Indeed, this is the whole point of the story.

Now comes the crunch point. With whom do we identify? Are we to see ourselves as the spiritually blind or the spiritually sighted? It's not immediately clear which it will be. We seem to be the insiders, so, are we also spiritually blind? We might like to see ourselves as being hard done by, as being in the lower position, so, are we spiritually sighted? The truth is probably that we must always see ourselves in both places. Our risk is not one or the other. It is that, from time to time, we are in different places. As Jesus says elsewhere, if the householder had known when the thief was coming, he would have been prepared.² The final message is to be aware at all times.

We are reminded of this by the opening verse of George Herbert's poem, "The Sacrifice":

*OH all ye, who passe by, whose eyes and minde
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blinde;
To me, who took eyes that I might you finde:
Was ever grief like mine?³*

² Luke 12:39

³ <https://www.ccel.org/h/herbert/temple/Sacrifice.html>