

Date: 06/03/2005 Geoff Chadwick
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Congregation: Anglican Church Brunswick
Scripture reference: John 9:1-41
Topic: The Blind man as a model convert

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Raymond Brown in his masterful commentary on John's Gospel maintains that Jn 9 is "Johannine dramatic skill at its best" (Brown, Vol 1, p 376). The story of the man born blind is one of the most profound stories in human literature – not just the bible. It has so many levels of meaning that one can become very much absorbed by the story. Is it a story about original sin (being blind from birth); or about "none being so blind as those who will not see"; or about the gradual illumination of Jesus' identity to the world of new belief?

The answer is "Yes" to these and more. The levels of meaning are multiple.

So what to look at today? Perhaps we can look at the development of the blind man's profession of faith in Jesus. In the story he appears as a model convert. The development of his faith in Jesus is seen to be representative of all those who would follow Jesus. It goes like this.

Firstly, the man is born blind. An allusion to the concept of original sin (although not in the later sense of Augustine). The man is born into a world where everything is not ideal. In his case he's physically blind. In our case we are blind at birth to many things ... prejudice, injustice, greed and the like. As time progresses we become illuminated about these things. Healing from them all is, of course, what we hope for.

Now the man who was blind is given his sight. Such illumination cannot go without interrogation. So he is quizzed by the blind sighted people. Hear what happens at the first quizzing:

John 9

[10] But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" [11] He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." [12] They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Here is step one in faith development. (Or in what theologians might call his Christology.) Here, at this early stage, Jesus is simply "The man".

For most of us who are followers of Jesus we began with an understanding of Jesus as "The Man". Maybe even *the* man. When asked "Where is he?" we don't really know. All we know is that there is something about *the* man.

Further quizzing, however might bring us to a different place:

[15] Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." [16] Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. [17] So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

Our Christology has developed. Jesus is no longer *the man*- but has become "a prophet". Prophets, in the biblical sense are not people who foretell the future, but people who "forth-tell" the truth. And so we see Jesus as the "truth teller". The one who "tells it like it is". The one whose courage is sufficient to confront the injustices of the day.

Now the blind man gets quizzed again and gets driven out:

[32] [The man said] Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. [33] If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." [34] They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

As with many who have followed the cause of a prophet, they are driven out by the authorities. Our modern-day prophets have suffered the same fate: Ghandi, Mandela,

Martin Luther King. And we, as we become more aware of the Jesus who was driven out by the Authorities, begin to see his role as prophet as just a little too limited. When we gaze at his life we want a higher category: "From God" now becomes our catch phrase.

[35] Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" [36] He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." [37] Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." [38] He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. [39]

And so to the final stage of our Christology. Even "From God" seems too limited.

"From God" gives way to "Is God". Ultimately we all have to ponder this question. Is Jesus simply "From God" or is he God? That is the Christological question for us all.

Of course the blind man has got it right. His conversion has been complete. He has moved from simply acknowledging Jesus as "The man" to worshipping him as "Son of Man". For him "The man" will no longer do. "Son of Man" is what is needed.

Now our own faith journey many follow the pattern of the blind man. Perhaps you've moved from "The man" to "Son of man". But maybe you've got stuck. Perhaps "Prophet" is all you can manage at the moment. Maybe "From God" is all you can cope with. So be it! Because in this story it's OK for the blind to be leading the blind.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.