

*Homily given by Diocese of Edmonton Bishop Jane Alexander on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 30, 2014, during a Choral Eucharist and Act of Remembrance for all the children who never returned home from Indian Residential School.*

I would like to talk to you this morning about our gospel reading (John 9:1-41). When our eyes are opened through faith, then we can see who God is, and what he does in our lives. So I am going to talk to you about being able to see clearly enough to see that Jesus is the treasure that we are all seeking, and that it is our faith in Christ that can clear our eyes.

But first a little story. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal, they lay down for the night and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes woke his friend up and said, "Watson, look up and tell me what you see." Watson replied, "I see millions and millions of stars." "What does that tell you?" said Holmes. Watson waxing lyrical says, "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Why, what does it tell you?" Holmes said, "Watson you idiot, someone has stolen our tent."

It has been said that sometimes we fail to see the forest for the trees. At times, that is true. Because of our perspective, the conclusions we draw about certain events in our lives can be either accurate or wholly off-base. The blind man in the gospel was given a whole new perspective on life when he gained his physical sight. The scribes and Pharisees were invited to look at things differently but preferred to stay in the dark. Over the past few days we have had here in Edmonton an incredible opportunity to see with new eyes the truth of the Indian Residential Schools through the presence here of the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on its final nationwide stop in Alberta. I think there are astonishing parallels between the gospel and our stories here today.

First let's turn to the gospel. Jesus is the light of the world and here he is with a man who cannot see. By the time the gospel reading ended we are having to redefine what we mean by blind and sighted and decide just who it is in this story that cannot or WILL NOT see.

We start with a miracle. Jesus gives sight to the blind just as was promised in Isaiah, "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isaiah 35:5) And the people are not happy, or at least some of the people are not happy. People deserve what comes to them, if this man was blind then either he or his parents must have sinned. Blindness is a punishment. We hear those views being put forward and of course we are shocked. We would never behave like that, would we? We would never look at someone's differences in social station, in economic status, in gender differences, in academic or psychological levels and say they deserve what they get. We would never make those decisions based on racial background. I wish that were actually true. This reading is apt for us today because society still tends to think like the Pharisees in the gospel. Actually, let's stop there. 'Society' is an easy place to hide. What about saying 'we?' No. Still too broad. I need to say 'I'. If I think, or say, 'they deserve it' then I should be ashamed. I AM ashamed.

Jesus has compassion on the man and heals him. In first century Palestine blindness meant that you would be poor. You would beg for a living. You lived at the mercy and the generosity of others. Unless your particular kind of blindness was self-correcting, there was no hope whatsoever for a cure. To have been born blind is to have been excluded from birth. The disciples talk about the man as if he is some kind of specimen or an interesting theological problem: 'Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents?' Wrong question. The right question

should be ‘how can we help you?’ not ‘whose fault is it?’ The man in the gospel gradually comes to see physically and also who Jesus is. The Pharisees and the Jews, on the other hand, become increasingly blind.

Let’s look at the man first. Jesus goes from being ‘a man called Jesus,’ to ‘a prophet,’ to ‘a man from God.’ The man gets a bit uppity with the people who question him saying ‘do you want to be his disciple?’ Eventually he seems to throw in his lot completely with Jesus and acknowledges him as the Son of Man: ‘Lord I believe. I know I was blind, but now I see.’ We have all sung those words, haven’t we: ‘was blind, but now I see.’

But this miraculous healing is questioned. ‘It’s not even the same man. Who does Jesus think he is? He can’t heal this man’s blindness – the day is not the right day for healing. Healing implies the forgiveness of sin and only God can do that. Jesus should be following the Law of Moses, just like them and be a disciple of Moses, just like them. It’s not right for anyone to consider themselves a disciple of Jesus. There are rules to society and you can’t just change them because you see things differently. Jesus is a Sabbath-breaker, a rule-breaker, he can have nothing to do with God.’ (N T Wright) ‘We know this man is a sinner.’

The Pharisees have to verify the healing so the man can take his place in the community, but they do not want to. These days it would be all over YouTube and up on Facebook in a flash – in those days for something to be acknowledged and true, especially in terms of healing of disease, the religious authorities had to say it was so. They are aware of the threat that Jesus poses, they know what he’s been up to and they have said that if anyone calls Jesus the messiah they will be put out of the temple. There is a lot at stake and they do not want to see differently.

So, today, hearing this story we ask ourselves, What are WE seeing and saying? ‘That is just the way it is. Things can never change. The relationship between First Nations people and incomers or settlers can never be reconciled? The wounds of the past can never be healed? OR, can we say: ‘We must find a way to walk together and trust our God to help bring us all healing.’ What is the new and miraculous thing we are called to hope for because we believe our God is a God of reconciliation.’ Was it really only three months ago this cathedral church of All Saints’ was full on Christmas eve and we sang “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” and sang of God, “light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings?” I think I saw glimpses of light and life and healing in my own life and certainly in these past few days. We truly worship a God of light and life and healing.

In the Middle Ages Richard of Chichester wrote: Dear Lord three things I pray, To see thee more clearly, Love thee more dearly, Follow thee more nearly, Day by day. As our vision clears we must look inwards. We look in and see things in ourselves that can be open to change - our brokenness and fear perhaps? We look within and open our eyes to our own beauty to see ourselves as God sees us. We see ourselves as people of limitless capacity to bring life and hope into the world through the grace of God and the love of His son Jesus.

So many people at the TRC spoke of how lonely they had been, at the schools and in their lives. I suspect the man born blind was lonely. Jean Vanier says in his book *Becoming Human* that, ‘To be lonely is to feel unwanted and unloved, and therefore unlovable. Loneliness is a taste of death. No wonder some people who are desperately lonely lose themselves in mental illness or violence or addictions to forget the inner pain.’ Jesus restores us to community with God and gives himself that we might be in community with one another. The church is a community. The body of Christ is a community. Perhaps, sometimes, we don’t see that in all its beauty and promise.

We need to ask God to open our eyes. To open our eyes so we can see the world through His eyes, and to open our eyes so we can see who we are called to be. To open our eyes so that we can see God. The cry of so many of our first nations brothers and sisters that I heard was ‘I don’t know who I am. My identity was taken. I was told I was worthless.’ How can we help people to see themselves as beautiful and valued? How can we see their beauty and our own? The man in the gospel this morning eventually finds his own voice – did you notice that? That is God’s wish for us - that we each find our voice. We need to listen to hear, we need to look, to see. We must ask God to guide us as we begin to see better, to be our shepherd, a guide who can see clearly and will lead us along the right path.

If we look around us with the eyes of faith can we really see what the image of Christ looks like in one another and appreciate the abundance of colours, shapes and sizes we all come in. Tall skinny people and short squishy people like me. We can also learn that Each person has been created by God and for God. Each of us has a vulnerable heart and yearns to love and be loved and valued. Each one has a mission. Each of us is born so that God’s work may be accomplished in us. (Jean Vanier)

So the man born blind was made for love. Each child, each person: black, white, brown you name it, each one is made for love. The person we see as least in this world and the person we see as most powerful is made for love. Jesus touches the man born blind, Jesus heals him, Jesus speaks to him and not about him. In other words, he treats the man with respect. In the church can we learn from this terrible experience of the residential schools and learn not to talk about our first nations brothers and sisters, but talk to them. Can we find a meeting place? Will we be able to be brothers and sisters? One of our clergy said this week that the presence of the residential schools ripped the spiritual fabric of this land. Can we see this and in seeing it can we attempt to repair it?

Seeing and hearing the truth changes us, gives us opportunity and raises the expectation of transformation. Once you know the truth you can become a better person or, I think, a worse person. A worse person if you do nothing with it, if it doesn’t affect your prayer life, your actions, the way you share yourself with the world, spend your money and, yes, even the way you vote. A better person if we take what we know of Christ and form honest and loving and equal relationships, if we speak for the excluded and befriend the outcast. No one should have to fight for recognition or prove themselves worthy of being called a child of God.

I have a little person in my life, she is three and half. Perhaps you have little people in your lives. Yesterday, when I got home from the TRC, I hugged her so tightly and I cried buckets. I could not stop crying for all those little people who were taken, and those who did not ever return. This TRC here in Canada is the only one that starts specifically with what happened to children. That is a big truth to come to terms with and to think about as we continue to see the ongoing impact of the schools. Hug your little people tightly as we think what we can and will do.

In a few moments all of us will meet Christ face to face in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist; we will be nourished in our faith and Christ will offer us eyes to see, and ears to hear. What we do with that gift will be up to us, but I believe that Christ has high hopes for us his children.

AMEN