

Provoking His Enemies
Lent 4, Year A
John 9: 1-41
3 April 2011

As a part time army chaplain I couldn't help noticing that riflemen in the infantry corps tended to be very young – teenagers to early 20's being the norm. Later I came to understand why that was useful to their employers. The young are under the illusion that they are invulnerable, bullet proof as it were. So given the right motivation and leadership it is possible to persuade them to do foolhardy things, like get up out of a trench and advance towards an automatic weapon that is firing at them.

Later experience of adult life teaches us just how fragile the human body is. We see others damaged physically for life by chance misadventure or by foolish risk taking, and we become careful. In fact we become prudent across a range of possible vulnerabilities. No need to go looking for trouble when it often comes looking for us.

So it is puzzling that Jesus having got to 30 or thereabouts, already wise beyond his years, doesn't seem to have learned this lesson. Each gospel account of his ministry begins with the same pattern. Fresh, vivid teaching is offered in tandem with striking signs of the Kingdom, but in such a way that it gets up the nose of those who have the potential to bring grief and strife into his life. And it is not just human agencies he antagonises. It has been pointed out that the first to recognise him for who he really is are the demons. That same theologian goes on to say that Jesus arouses the world's slumbering No to God. What was latent and unexpressed comes out into the open through the style of his ministry.

Today's story of the man born blind is of a piece with this oppositional pattern. We are just settling in to a rattling good yarn about a healing miracle when in comes this repeating chorus of criticism and condemnation from religious enthusiasts and authorities. In fact they return to the fray several times, which is what spins the story out over 41 verses, a remarkable textual length for the gospels.

The offence that has been given here is healing on the Sabbath. If we can't get excited about that consider the other neuralgia points that Jesus squeezes. Reinterpreting the Law so as to say what really matters and what doesn't, relativising large chunks of the Law, teaching with self-claimed Divine authority, consorting with untouchables, outspoken attacks on leading holiness movements of the day and of some religious authorities. Tact and diplomacy doesn't come in to it. This is a man who seems intent on provoking his enemies. But why?

As we move in to that part of Lent that has recurring passion predictions we are being asked to get our head around a part of the gospel message that is potentially difficult for modern sensibilities. Recurring parts of the New Testament make it clear that Jesus goes to his death by the deliberate fore-knowledge and intention of God – He intends this to happen, and the unfolding incidents in the gospel story are being shaped in such a way as to bring this outcome about. The Father sends his Son to the Cross - and the Son in glad obedience co-operates in the flow of events that bring this to pass. Only at the last in the Garden of Gethsemane will Jesus shrink from the cost of what is involved.

To get a line on why that is necessary we need to press right in to the heart of what our situation is, of what needs to be done about it, and of the kind of God we are dealing with here.

Jean Paul Sartre, and a variety of modern philosophers, have said that it is necessary not to believe in God because an omnipotent God rules out human freedom and autonomy. Our chief glory as human beings is our ability to make our own choices in an independent way, which is something, that can't happen when all seeing, all knowing God is breathing down our necks. The very nature of the freedom that matters is the ability to make authentic choices, ones that aren't coerced or shaped by all-powerful agencies outside our control.

Of course here some might like to point out that all this free choosing hasn't always done us a power of good. There is a lot of misery and unhappiness in the world as a result of foolish or evil choices. Nevertheless human beings love to have it so, and God must address this situation as he finds it.

Three priorities shape God's dealings with us. He will not overrule our freedom and abolish it. He will not reduce us to robots who have no choice but to follow him. The philosophers can relax – our spontaneous loving response is the only one God is interested in.

At the same time God cannot and will not ignore the barrier that our false choices have put between him and us. Our wrongdoing has to be addressed. Sin and evil put a twist in the nature of reality that has to be unknotted for human flourishing to take place.

And God will not behave in an omnipotent fashion – He will approach us in way that is accessible and that invites our free consent. In fact the very nature of this God is that of a generous giving away of all his richness, all his privileges in a self emptying approach to us that enables us to relate to him in our way of life, and to some extent on our terms.

In the incarnation God approaches human beings in an accessible way. Here is a life and a story that we can relate to. But given the power of evil, and its influence over us, his is a story that is bound to have a tragic ending. That evil needs to be confronted, and Jesus does not shrink from it, which is what is going on in these controversy stories in the gospel. He will not duck or hide from what is stewing away in the hearts of those who ought to know better. If religious people object to a healing miracle that gives someone their sight back then he will speak a word of judgement.

What is going on in the ministry of Jesus is that he is seeking out the places of human God forsakenness, and by his presence there fills them with his presence. Having emptied himself of Divine privileges he comes to the collision point of human freedom, human evil and Divine determination to bring us back to himself. For this is a God who will not let go. He does not present his offer on a take it or leave it basis. He will do whatever it takes to bring us back on side - even if it means His Son dying a violent and tragic death on the Cross.

The Cross is the essential part of our deliverance and liberation story for it is the means by which Jesus will descend to the place of the dead, will take our sins down in to hell having taken them upon himself, and will leave them there. Even hell will become the place that God inhabits, and turns in to a province owned by him, so that we need never know that place of God-forsakenness. The Cross is a happening, an event, that changes the whole nature of reality, which is why it is a confrontation that God will bring about, and which is why Jesus provokes his enemies, as he did this morning.