

**Being healed from the blindness of thinking God is a *God of punishment*.**

*Open our eyes Jesus to who you really are, in his name we ask it. Amen*

The old Irishman got the call he had long expected but hoped would never come. *Your brother is dying, you must come now!*

His brother lived in New York and he lived in a little village in Southern Ireland. He had never travelled but knew he must go and be by his brother's side. So, he packed his bag, got all his courage together and booked an airline ticket. The flight was bad enough, but he was totally overwhelmed by New York. He had never seen so many people in all his life.

He had been given very clear instructions to get the subway. He had been told where to get off and which trains to swap to in what platforms.

With a good deal of anxiety, he walked underground. He was lining up to get on board the first train when the unthinkable happened. The lights went out. There was a city-wide power cut. What to do? He could see very little.

He couldn't abort his journey; he needed to get to his brother's side. Just then a voice from the gloom - *Are you lost?* He explained his story to the faceless person.

*I can help you, said the voice, but you need to trust me. Here, the voice said, reaching out his hand, hold my hand.* He held back for a moment, then he thought, *what choices do I have?*

The hand and the voice lead him on an amazing journey. They travelled for several hours moving amongst the carriages swiftly changing trains. In the end the voice and the hand lead him up to the surface. *There, said the Voice, there is your brother's house.* Sure enough, he recognised it from the photos. He turned to thank him. *Tell me, he said, how could you lead me in such darkness so well? That's easy, said the guide, I'm blind.*

Today our guide is also a blind man. The blind man of the Gospel. He was born blind. But through his encounter with Jesus he is able to see. Like us in Lent he is on a journey. It's a journey from blindness to sight, but it's also a journey from the blindness of not knowing Jesus to seeing him for who he really is.

But John is messing with our heads. Many are blind, not just the man. The Pharisees are blinded by their love of the sabbath and the rules. Jesus has broken the rules yet again. Many find it hard to believe he is really healed.

Once I visited a man who was going blind. He reported to me that he only had two weeks to see. So, I said, *Do you mind if I pray for you?*

*Can't do any harm*, he said.

So, I did. I went back to see him 2 weeks after. He was wearing glasses, and moving about the house unaided. *How's the eyes?* I said. *Oh, I can see*, he said, *with these glasses. That's an answer to prayer!* I said. *No*, he said. *It was a coincidence.*

Many did not believe this man was healed. *It wasn't him, it was someone else*, they said. They call his parents, they say, *you talk to him*. They are afraid of being tossed out of the synagogue.

Like us going through Lent, this formerly blind man is on a journey. He starts off, (vs 11) seeing Jesus as a man, good start, then (vs 17) a prophet, by vs 38, Lord, I believe.

But we are not well served by our word **believe**. We think of *believing* as an intellectual exercise; an exercise of the head, but the Greek means *to trust*. We trust with the heart, as it is with faith. We trust that by putting our hand in Jesus, we have found a guide for life, one that will take us through even the darkest night, through the subways of a power cut.

But I want to suggest there is an even greater blindness in the passage. One that most of us suffer from. And one that the disciples all have. It was the common held belief that if you had a disability, that it was because you were a sinner. *Rabbi*, the disciples ask, *whose sins, this man's or his parents', caused him to be born blind*. And Jesus answered, *neither*.

This was a common question put to Jesus in a variety of ways. When the tower fell on some people, whose sin caused it to fall? Over and over again, Jesus was up against this belief, not in a loving god, but in one that pushes, one that curses, one that judges.

God loves you, you are loved and held and cherished by God. God is not punishing you.

Once when I was praying in a church, the secretary brought in young man. He explained his story. He had been sick; his mother had died and his girlfriend left him.

Do you think god is punishing me? That was an easy question – No!

*Does God still love me?* Another easy one – Yes!

*That, he said, is all I need to know!* And he wandered off.

This last week, I heard of an Anglican who grew up never knowing that God loved them. That was the saddest thing I had heard all week. It wasn't until they were in their 20's that a vicar said to them, *Do you know that God loves you?* They had thought that God was out to push them or judge them and that any grace or love had to be earned with the right behaviour.

Along with this man, we all stand in need of healing today. Healing from the blindness that believes God is punishing us. The man and those around him are liberated from the concept that of a punishing God.

Jesus stands ready to heal you and to heal me. The writer of *Amazing Grace*, John Newton, as he slipped into blindness, began to see that his former trade of slave-trading was not of God, rather blind but now he could see. *Amazing grace had set him free.*

May it set us free too.

***Nick Mountfort.***