

In the story John tells, Jesus sees the blind man - a man whom no one else really sees. And who is the only one in the story who really sees Jesus. This Gospel suggests that vulnerability, softness, curiosity, and openness are essential to real seeing. And there is not much of any of these traits in the peoples of this story.

In the eyes of his peers, the man is contaminated, burdensome, and expendable. His blindness is seen as punishment. He deserves to be blind. And they do not.

In his community's calculus of human worth, the blind man barely registers - he is not a human being; he is Blindness.

Which is why, when the man's sight is restored by Jesus, his own townspeople - the people he has lived and worshipped with for years - do not recognise him.

They don't know how to see him without his disability.

They do not want to see him without his disability.

To do so would be to recognise a common humanity, a bond, a kinship. He has only been seen as a differently abled man.

This raises a pastoral issue for us when we interact with others who are differently abled.

How limited or keen is our sight when we are with people who are differently abled?

Do we see more than the disability?

When the man shows up at the Temple healed and whole, the community rallies to discredit him. To restore order, re-establish the social hierarchy, and reinforce the status quo.

This shared need is held so deeply, voiced so loudly, they are blind to any joy for their healed neighbour, friend, child.

If the man's blindness *isn't* a punishment for sin, then what does that mean about how the world works? *Anyone* might get sick, or suffer from a disability, or face years of undeserved pain and suffering for no discernible reason whatsoever. That can't be right? That would be a terrifying, destabilising version of how the world works.

We know all too painfully well that this is exactly how the world works. Illness, disability, or every form of suffering is not a punishment from God. And illness, disability, or every form of suffering - happens.

No one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. They need this man to be blind to reinforce their righteous sense of superiority and to reinforce their control of their world, and perhaps even of God.

His family backs away from him, and his parents put their own safety before his welfare.

The parent's fear overwhelms any joy of the son's healing, as they abandon their son to the authorities.

Everything was easier, better when he was blind - say the ones who see.

The community responds with contempt. Its need to preserve its own sense of righteousness held more important than celebrating a fellow human being's restoration to life. The community's legalistic approach to faith not only prevent them from seeing the healed man; it also prevents them from seeing God's love and power at work in their midst.

While the religious authorities want Jesus to be seen as the sinner not as the hero in this story.

Most people who encounter Jesus are too busy seeing what they want to see – a magician, a heretic, a political and military leader, a carpenter’s son, a wise man, a phony, a threat – to notice what the blind man discerns. To see what the blind man comes to see.

The blind man alone sees Jesus as the Son of Man and calls him, “Lord.” This is one of the rare and beautiful moments in the Gospels when Jesus is truly seen.

The blind man sees Jesus as Jesus sees him; the gaze and the recognition in this story are mutual.

During this Lenten season, may we, too, confess our blindness and receive sight.

May we praise the one who kneels in the dirt and gets his hands dirty in order to heal us.

May we also soften and prepare the ground we stand on, so when new life appears in whatever surprising way God chooses, we will embrace, cherish, and celebrate the joy.

*Wendy*