

**“Seeing what’s there” – John 9:1-41 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 15 March 2020.**

The backdrop to our gathering is COVID-19 so this is a different kind of sermon. It is likely that this will be the last time we gather in this church for corporate worship for some months. I will reflect on the gospel reading today and then outline initial thinking of our plan ahead from some church council conversations. The reading today speaks to our context. It is a story of Jesus giving sight to a blind man. I am going through the story step by step.

The first part of the reading is conjecture about the origin of his blindness. Despite the community looking for people to blame – the man himself, his parents - Jesus blames no one. Jesus refuses to align sin with sickness; he refuses to blame anyone for people falling ill. As then, so now, including in relation to the latest virus. Blame misses the point.

The second part. Many translators differ from the New Revised Standard Version, the version we use at Knox Church, and I want to use that alternative reading. The NRSV says: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” But many scholars say the full stop is in a different place and the translation should read – “Jesus said “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind.” Full stop. Then it continues, “So that God’s works might be revealed in him (in the blind man) we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day.”

The Christian faith is primarily about being part of the life of God in the world, of doing the works of the God who sent us. A Christian is a person who acts as one sent into the world to do the work of God. A church is a body of people who together act as people sent into the world to do the work of God. Times such as this are for us to do the works of God while it is day.

Let’s put our physical gathering in that context. In the history of the church, physical gathering on Sunday has been one part of how we have formed and expressed Christian identity, but it is not the focus of our faith nor is it essential to being church. We are blessed with the gift of each other and the resources of the church to help us do the works of God, but there are many ways that gift comes to us beyond our Sunday physical gathering.

Years ago, when communism was still constraining Christianity in Eastern Europe, I was part of a group of New Zealanders who visited churches and met with church leaders there – in Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and what was then called the Soviet Union. More recently, I was part of a group of Uniting Church in Australia leaders who met with church leaders in China. We learned that when people could not physically gather, the church spread and grew. In China, when Deng Xiao Peng came to power, religion surfaced again and Christianity burgeoned.

By having to find other ways of connecting beyond focusing on the physical gathering, they built a framework of life that enabled them to thrive. I am convinced that that is the opportunity before us now, especially with the gift of online communication. The Reformed movement grew in parallel with the development of the printing press – we now can discover the gift of online connection in our time.

So I invite us, please be careful with our language – the church is not closing and worship is not ending - far from it – rather, our physical gathering is ceasing and we are rediscovering dimensions of being church that may not have been so obvious to us.

Then ... Jesus said “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” In the midst of crises, we are invited to look for the light, to live in and from the light. Christ is our morning star, our light in the darkness. We are invited to understand what is happening against the backdrop of the love that is revealed in Jesus Christ, and to keep turning back to that light.

Then ... Jesus spits on the ground and makes mud with the saliva and spreads the mud on the man’s eyes, saying “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” What a mix mud is, saliva and dirt. The materiality that conveys the virus is also the materiality that helps heal us. The creation that binds us to each other as vulnerable beings is also the creation that provides the means of our healing. The use of mud echoes the second creation story – “Then the Lord God formed man, adam, from the dust of the ground.” The mud reminds us of our vulnerability and invites us to accept it as inherent to who we are. On Ash Wednesday we said – “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” We are people of this earth, and tied to its fortunes for health and illness. And

we can imagine that the spreading of mud on the eyes represents what medical professionals do.

“Then he went and washed and came back able to see.” In the midst of COVID-19, we’re invited to see our deep connection to each other, our reliance on each other, our social solidarity and our collective vulnerability. The invitation is not to social distancing, but to physical distance and social solidarity.

Then ... John spends most time describing the many responses to the healing. Questions and rumours and half-truths swirl around, with a spirit of fear and anxiety. The Pharisees are afraid. The parents are afraid of what others say. But through it all, as best he can, the man once blind tries to say what he thinks happened to him, and he just keeps coming back to that experience. He speaks of what he knows, and so his witness persists despite all the questions, and all the anxiety. Jurgen Moltmann - “Hope is anticipated joy; anxiety is anticipated terror.” What do we know? With the psalmist – we are held in the steadfast love of God that endures forever. End of the reflection on the reading.

Let me speak more directly about our situation at Knox.

First, there has been a wonderful response of people offering help in many ways. Offers to buy groceries for people. Offers to phone people. Offers to help with our online work. Offers to help people develop their online skills. We will find a way to match offers with needs.

Secondly, we will further develop our pastoral network through the use of phoning. That is a priority. We will have a system for making regular contact. Some needs have already emerged, for example families divided by the travel ban.

Thirdly, we will develop our online presence. We have people with expertise offering to help. We will move from a focus on physical gathering to creative online engagement with people in and beyond our congregation. That involves much more attention to curating and publishing resources and inciting

conversations. Already 162 households receive our weekly email. However, we will also pay attention to those who are not able to engage online.

Fourthly, our church council is meeting on Wednesday. We are going to focus on immediate needs but also on envisaging what kind of congregation we want to be in six months' time. That will mean we will need to reallocate some resources towards that vision. We do know that that is going to change especially the work of Kerry, Karen our organist, Jacqui our secretary and Les our facilities officer.

Fifthly, we will be working with other churches, especially with First Church to share resources. This is not a time for fear or anxiety, but to hope in the gospel, and possibilities for congregation.

It is still daytime, to do the work of the one who sent us. Gracious God, In the midst of isolating, help us rediscover your strengthening presence, that nurtures souls, inspires love, nourishes hope, that elicits care. Amen.

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

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made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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