

## Lent 4, Matins

1 Samuel 16:1-13, John 9

Father Christopher

Many years ago a friend of mine, who is a political journalist, interviewed David Lammy for the BBC at Broadcasting House. Afterwards he walked down from the studio with the man who is now the Shadow Foreign Secretary, and Mr Lammy got into a waiting taxi. Then something strange happened: instead of asking Mr Lammy himself, the cabby asked my friend 'Where's he going?' You may think he was reading too much into it, but my friend was sure it was because David Lammy is black. He saw him as having less agency than my white friend. Racism is most often manifested in such small, but wounding, slights; even if it only receives public attention in the worst cases, as in the revolting murders of Stephen Lawrence here or George Floyd in Minneapolis in the US.

How do you think it feels to have someone not see you, but speak past you to someone else, who is somehow seen as more human, about you? Well, the disciples do precisely that at the start of our long second reading today. Standing next to the blind man they ask Jesus a question about him, seeing him as an interesting specimen for their philosophical musings: '*Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?*' They are unlikely to have intended any harm – they no doubt assume that the man born blind, begging by the road, must somehow lack the sensitivities of a 'normal' person. After all, *they* would be too ashamed to beg. If he has reached that low, and been there for many years, surely *he* cannot take offence can he?

There is a hint of rebuke in Jesus's words: neither of them has sinned, he says, as He starts to do something very strange. He makes clay by spitting on the ground, which He then uses to anoint the man's eyes. The word to anoint in Greek has 'chrism' in it, which really means to smear, but is for us related to baptism, 'christening'. Just as creating out of the earth resonates with God's creation of Adam in Genesis. But after *re-creating* our hero – for the man born blind is more prominent in this wonderful passage even than Jesus, and certainly says more – Jesus tells him to do something himself. And his healing is only effective when the man does something for himself. The man who has been done to, who has received, seated, head bowed, for as long as he or anyone can remember, who is used to being ignored, as others speak about him over his head, does something for himself, and it is in his washing himself that he is healed. He *went* blind, washed in the pool called 'The one who is sent', and *returns* seeing.

After this baptism, if we can call it that, though in the early church this was the last reading read to catechumens about to be baptised, we see the man's transformation unfold with the story. He grows in confidence, agency and in his identity, just as his proclamation of his faith in the one who recognised him as a beloved child of God grows in its certainty.

How many of you have gone through an awkward stage in your life, unsure of yourself, unsure of whether you are loved for who you are? Perhaps in your teenage years, perhaps later, after a relationship breakdown or losing a job; perhaps you are going through just such a time now. Self-confidence and self-esteem are for most of us fragile things, but which can grow through nurture; for some however, that belief that you are loved, that you have something worth offering, that people might want to hear what you have to say, is something that flickers faintly, if at all, throughout life. '*Is not this he that sat and begged?*' In response to others arguing about him after

his healing – and note, not asking him directly again – suddenly we hear with clarity his first words, shining out in our story. *'I am he.'* That is it: *'I am he.'*

From this straightforward claim to his place in the conversation the man goes on to explain in simple terms what has happened to him: *'A man that is called Jesus made clay, and anointed mine eyes ... and I went and washed, and I received sight.'* He is asked again. *'I washed, and do see.'*

Every rehearsal gets bolder, as do their questions. From talking about him, rather than to him, they move to asking him about the bare facts of what has happened to him, and the Pharisees then think to ask him something even verging on his opinion: *'What sayest thou of him, that hath opened thine eyes?'* to which he responds, *'He is a prophet.'* His parents are asked, and they say that *'he shall speak for himself.'* ... *'one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.'* This confidence even spills over into cocky sarcasm: *'I have told you already, and ye did not hear: wherefore would ye hear it again? will ye also be his disciples?'* Listen to that phrase: *'will ye also be his disciples.'* From simply seeing, having been blind, he has now, almost without knowing it, become one of Jesus's disciples. *'...ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes.'* *'If this man were not of God, he could do nothing.'*

John's gospel is full of paradox, and just as this man's confidence has grown to its peak, as he has gone from lying in the gutter not looking up, not speaking, with conversations going on over his head, to mocking the most powerful Jewish authorities to their face, he is cast out. *'[D]ost thou teach us?'* The Pharisees cannot bear the change in position, the change in role that this man's new dignity brings.

And yet, though cast out, and on one level therefore back to the position he was in when we met him, or an even worse position perhaps, everything is changed. Yes, he can see physically, but more than that, he can see spiritually in the way the Pharisees cannot. The great irony of this story is that they are the real blind men. And after so long with Jesus off stage, in the wings, our story ends with an intimate encounter between Jesus and the man I rightly called our hero. *'Who is he [that is, the Son of God] Lord, that I might believe on him?'* He now acknowledges Jesus's lordship, and goes on to make a statement of total revelation, up there with Thomas's *'My Lord and my God.'*

Alongside the blind man's opening words, *'I am he'*, as he comes to know himself, we have his concluding words, *'Lord, I believe.'* and *'he worshipped him'*. In this short space of time this outcast has come to know Jesus, to be given the sight with which to see Jesus; and in fact he is really the first witness to who Jesus is. But in seeing Jesus, the man knows himself to have value, to be loved. Jesus's eyes shine out of every personal encounter in the gospels, with His intense loving attention, but here He gives eyes to another with which to see those eyes of His, and in seeing Jesus's eyes to know that he is loved for who he is, just as he was loved into existence by God, as we all are.

In knowing that he is loved, he knows that he has value. We can almost feel his posture straighten as we watch him over the course of this story blossom as a person through the growth of his faith. For if we have faith in Jesus, in God, we will begin to see ourselves as He sees us. And in that, the man born blind is a model for all of us. *'I am he.'* Amen