

Medicine of the Person

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Bible study 3

Dr Michael WEB-PEPLOE (UK)

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Light for blind eyes

(John 9: 1-38)

Leaving the temple, Jesus saw the man born blind. He was a well known beggar-the disciples knew that he had been born blind. He did not ask to be healed-he probably thought his situation hopeless; after all there is no other record in the Bible of the healing of a man born blind, though there are many instances of the restoration of lost sight. This was a special case and Jesus dealt with it in a special way by taking the dust of the earth and forming it into clay using his saliva. After anointing his eyes with the clay he told the blind beggar to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. Something in the love and compassion with which Jesus treated him made the man obey without question. He groped his way to the pool, washed and could see. He then walked home to parents and neighbours who, at first, could not believe that someone born blind could now see. And then, because the miracle had happened on the Sabbath, they hauled him off to the religious authorities.

What of the disciples? They had seen Jesus restoring lost sight to many. Yet their first reaction to the beggar's need was to ask: "Who is responsible? Who can we blame"? Our contemporary blame culture, that blames somebody else for the problems we face, for the suffering that we cannot ease, is nothing new. If we can blame somebody else, then we can avoid getting involved. It is not our responsibility to try and put things right. Was it the man's own fault? Or were his parents to blame? Jesus firmly rejects both these explanations for the man's blindness. He did not himself offer a third explanation. Instead, he spoke of the opportunity that this man's blindness provided for a display of God's love and power. Jesus went on to say that he had to carry out the work of God while it was day. Night was coming. Christ knew he was facing betrayal and death by crucifixion. There was a time limit to how long he would remain on earth in bodily form. Jesus had to carry out the work of God while it was day so that God's grace might be revealed in the life of the man born blind.

Affliction, sorrow, pain, disappointment, loss provide opportunities for God to display his grace. First, it allows the sufferer to show God in action. When trouble and disaster fall upon someone who does not know God, they may well collapse, become bitter and twisted. The same suffering provides the person who walks with God the opportunity to display the strength, the beauty, the endurance and the nobility which are within the heart when God is there. Going a step further, by helping those who are in trouble or in pain, we can demonstrate to others the love of God. God is using us as the highway by which he sends his help into the lives of people in need. To help a fellow human being in need is to demonstrate God's nature, to show what God is like. Jesus is no longer a human presence in the world, healing all manner of sickness and disease, yet limited by time and space. But, down the centuries, he trusts his followers to carry on his work.

Cardinal Suenens puts the challenge like this: "Christ cannot live his life today in this world without our mouth, without our eyes, without our going and coming, without our heart. When we love, it is Christ loving through us".

Jesus did not come to explain away suffering, or to remove it. He came to fill it with his presence. As Corrie Ten Boom, who, in a Nazi concentration camp, had watched her beloved sister die said: "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still". Our faith is unique because we have a God who died for us and suffers with us.

But let's come back to the blind man. As we watch him through the story we see him sticking to one supreme fact: "This one thing I know. Once I was blind now I see". With his outward sight restored, he was able to appreciate light and darkness, the beauty of colours and shapes, to see his parents and neighbours for the first time. But he still lacked inward light. We see that inward light slowly increasing. To the religious authorities he said that he did not claim to know the person who had healed him, whether he was a sinner or not. While he was telling his story, there dawns upon him the certainty that the one who had healed him must be a good man, a man approved by God, even a prophet. The light was still growing, and he went on to say that it was a marvellous thing that although the religious authorities did not recognise Jesus, he himself was convinced that he must be from God, and therefore was determined to become his disciple.

As a result he was reviled, thrown out by the religious authorities, and abandoned by his parents. Yes he could see, but he could no longer beg, nobody would employ him, he was shunned by society and family. Christ's miraculous medical cure appeared to have prejudiced his quality of life. It was at this low point that Jesus found him and asked him the all important question: "Do you believe on the Son of God"? "Who is he Lord that I may believe on him"? Christ then revealed himself completely as he said to him: "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you". This was the first time that the blind man actually saw Jesus, and realised who it was who had healed him. His immediate response was: "Lord, I believe," and we read that "he worshipped him". Worship followed belief, and was an act of complete surrender and submission. So our Lord is seen receiving this man into a new relationship. Inward light reached full intensity. The blind man gained not only outward vision, but also spiritual insight.

We are all born blind. We may have perfect outward vision, but we all need a personal encounter with Jesus. We all need to answer this question: "Do you believe on the Son of God"? It is only if we answer: "Lord I believe," and go on to worship, surrendering our lives to the Lordship of Christ, that we can be cured of our inward blindness. Only then can spiritual light illuminate our hearts and minds. Only then can "the love of God be poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5). Only then will we be able to pass God's light and love on to others.

Can inward light still dawn through pain and suffering? Some years ago, I walked into a patient's room to examine him before his coronary angiogram. He had severe aortic stenosis and he was going to need an aortic valve replacement. He was in his early 30s, a successful businessman with a young family. He was a keen field hockey player, but had found that he was becoming very breathless on mild exercise. I had never met him before, and as I walked into his room, his first words to me were: "Doctor, do you believe in God"? I replied: "Yes I do, I am a Christian". We talked. He had been brought up in a Christian home, but with the pressures and responsibilities of a growing business and a growing family, God had been squeezed out. He required an operation which, though successful, would mean that his life would never be the same again – lifelong anticoagulants, antibiotic prophylaxis against bacterial endocarditis, regular follow-up visits to doctors. Faced with this sudden crisis, he felt that God was tapping him on the shoulder and saying: "Hey! Do you remember me"? Writing about the Problem of Pain, C.S.Lewis, who was himself later to suffer the loss of his wife to cancer, said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world".

In the town of Saranac Lake, New York State, USA, there stands a statue of Dr Edward Livingstone Trudeau, erected in his memory by his grateful patients. He was a 19th century pioneer in the diagnosis and treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis, and on the statue is engraved his motto: "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always." Even with our modern drugs and technology, it is relatively rare to be able to offer a patient a life-long cure. Yes, we can often relieve pain and suffering. But comfort, improved quality of life? - those are more difficult.

Twice a year, I go with a medical team to a group of ethnic-minority Hungarian speaking villages in Western Ukraine. One summer, we were running clinics in the village of Akli, when a young man in his early twenties and his teenage sister walked the 5 kilometres from a neighbouring village, begging us to come and see their father who was very sick at home. We drove over the next evening, and the patient's wife met us outside the door, and told us that he was dying from lung cancer. Thoracotomy in Hungary had confirmed inoperable cancer, but she did not want him to know that he was dying. We went in to see him (I will call him Jozsef). He was in his early 50s, extremely breathless, emaciated, and could only talk in a whisper, as the operation had damaged his recurrent laryngeal nerve. There was almost no air going into one lung, he had run out of pain medication, and was troubled by severe constipation. We promised to bring him pain relief and laxatives. He knew that he was dying, but both he and his wife were spending great emotional energy pretending to each other that he would recover. Daniel (my medical student interpreter) and I were driven over the next night by the local Mayor with whom we were staying. When we got there, the house was dark, but we crept into his room and found Jozsef awake. While our driver talked to his wife in another room, Daniel and I spent time with Jozsef, doing our best to make him more comfortable. He poured out his fears over his condition, his disappointment that the expensive operation in Hungary had only made him worse, and his worries about leaving his family without a breadwinner (he had been a chimney sweep). Daniel read the Bible with him, and prayed with him, while I (unable to speak Hungarian) sat on the bed, held his hand, and prayed hard. When his wife came in, he asked for his "Calvinist books", (he had grown up in the Hungarian Reformed Church). She produced a Bible and a hymn book and we sang him his favourite hymn, and after a final prayer, left him with enough medicines to last him several weeks.

I thought that was the end of the story, but when Daniel and I went back the next winter, we were privileged to hear the final outcome. About two weeks after we had seen him, Jozsef asked Pastor Attila (the Hungarian Reformed pastor we work with) for Holy Communion. Attila had spent a long time with him, had talked him through his anger with God at what had happened to him, and his worry about what would happen to his family. He had asked for and received God's forgiveness. Inner light had come and he was at peace.

One final thought, challenging words from the American pastor, Rick Warren. "You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.... The best use of life is love. The best expression of love is time. The best time to love is now.