

SERMON

SUNDAY 13TH NOVEMBER 2022

10.30AM



**ST. PETER'S NOTTING HILL
KENSINGTON PARK ROAD
W11 2PN**

JOHN 1: 1-7

Today we are thinking about "signs" which honour the Glory of God. These signs are highlighted in our series about the signs prominently recorded in John's Gospel. In particular the one recorded in today's reading about the man born blind (John 9: 1-7)

Of course these signs are not the only signs glorifying God. Some signs are all around us in our lives here and now today.

For example what a wonderful sign is given by the safe and happy birth of Pat & Kirsty's new baby. Praise the Lord for this great event.

Think for a second about other signs all around us such as the signs of God's creation and nature. There is a great poetic passage in Psalm 139 verses 13-14 about the sign of a new birth. The Psalmist writes:

*"For you created my inmost being
You knit me together in my mother's womb
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made
Your works are wonderful
I know that full well"*

Yes his works all around us are wonderful here and now.

A few days ago I was in Scotland in the Isle of Mull and I was surrounded by nature at its most glorious. Stags, hinds, eagles, orca whales, leaping salmon, soaring hills, lofty mountains, lochs, rivers, bracken and burns – the full panoply of Hebridean wilderness. And as if that wasn't enough on two consecutive evenings the indescribable majesty of the October night sky above the Highlands and Islands stretched out with perfectly clear visibility in a way that is almost never seen in urban Britain.

As I gazed up at the Milky Way, The Pleiades, The Plough, Orion, Venus, Mars and a zillion other stars and planets. In the silence of eternity, I felt miniscule in comparison to the magnificent panorama of God's heavens.

My visual glimpses of God's glory on the Isle of Mull are just a contemporary reminder that we don't need to go back to Jerusalem two thousand years ago and the story of the man born blind in order to catch modern glimpses of the Glory of God through his signs.

In the last few moments at this service we have been solemnly commemorating Remembrance Sunday with the two-minute silence.

Now it may seem something of an acrobatic leap in sermon preaching terms to jump from our reading in St. John's Gospel to Remembrance Sunday.

But I am going to try to do this by telling you a World War II ghost story – or really a God story – which is all about a sign, which was given in the middle of the Battle of Britain.

My Canadian Father told me this story. He was a fighter pilot flying Spitfires and he was the CO in the Battle of Britain of what was jokingly known as "the foreign crazies squadron". This was RAF wartime humour. The foreign crazies were no crazier as fighter pilots than anyone else.

They were volunteers mainly from the old countries of the Empire – Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada plus a number of free Polish pilots and a handful of others.

One afternoon in the summer of 1940 the foreign crazies squadron had been engaged in dogfights against enemy bombers and fighters over the North Sea. But one Spitfire and its pilot did not return.

My father safely back on the ground on his RAF aerodrome in Norfolk waited anxiously for the missing aircraft. Its return was delayed and delayed and delayed.

And my father eventually was just giving up hope and accepting that the squadron had lost one of its finest young pilots when just as dusk was falling the missing aircraft appeared in the sky.

Very low on fuel it landed back on the runway.
My father debriefed the young flight lieutenant.

"What happened?" he asked

The Spitfire pilot, who was only 19 years old, explained that in one of his dogfights over the North Sea a bullet from an enemy fighter had come through his cockpit and had badly damaged his instrument panel making it U/S or unserviceable.

Without his instruments the pilot was flying blind over the North Sea. He did not know whether he was going north, south, east or west and with his fuel gauge getting lower and lower he was badly frightened because he knew he was lost. But then another RAF Spitfire appeared out of the sky and came alongside him.

With known hand signals the young pilot managed to signal that his instruments were not working so the pilot of the newly arrived aircraft gave a known signal, which in effect meant "follow me – I will shepherd you back to your base"

So the young pilot followed his Good Shepherd who banked left and led him until the East Anglian coastline became visible. The shepherd aircraft led him down towards his Kings Lynn RAF station until he could see the runway.

And then the Good Shepherd signalled over and out and flew away. Before he did so the young pilot had the opportunity to note down the markings on his Good Shepherds RAF Spitfire, which were HJ142.

With only moments to spare before the fuel ran out the young flight lieutenant landed his Spitfire safely and was then debriefed by my father who got from him the full story of how he had been rescued by his good shepherd.

Without that shepherding the 19 year old pilot said he would certainly have ended up crashing into the North Sea because he was heading north for Greenland in the opposite direction to the English coast.

The young pilot said that he would like to thank the pilot of the other RAF Spitfire who had come to his rescue and shepherded him down to safety. This he said would be easy to do because he had noted down the markings of the shepherding plane HJ142.

So my father asked a WRAF telephonist to call up the air ministry and find out where HJ142 was based. A few minutes later the WRAF telephonist reappeared to say that there must have been some mistake. There was no such RAF aircraft with that registration number.

My father asked the young flight lieutenant if he could have got the registration number down wrong. The pilot replied absolutely not, he had not only memorised it but had written it down. So my father then spoke to the air ministry himself and a more senior officer said that well, Yes there had been an operational RAF Spitfire aircraft with that registration number but it had been shot down some seven months earlier and had been seen crashing into the North Sea killing the pilot.

So who was the good shepherd piloting HJ142?

Was this a ghost story, was it a God story, was it a sign? It was certainly a good story, which found its way into the newspapers in 1941 and even into a "factional" short story by Paul Gallico.

The point I am trying to get over is that God's signs can be seen with those who have eyes to see today in the night sky above the Isle of Mull.

Or with Remembrance Sunday memories of the Battle of Britain in the 1940's.

Just as much as it was 2000 years ago in Jerusalem when John wrote his account of Jesus restoring the sight of the man who was blind from birth.

Let's now turn to our Gospel reading from John Chapter 9. The story begins when the disciples ask Jesus a question which must seem to us not just a silly question but an idiotic question? Who caused this man to be born blind? His parents by their sins or the man himself by his own sins?

Now the disciples were not the brightest buttons on the beach. They often asked Jesus questions, which showed how much they lacked knowledge and understanding of what the Lord was saying or doing.

However, in this case the disciples do not deserve the blame for the foolishness of their question. Because it was deeply embedded in ancient Jewish culture, tradition and theology, which held that suffering was caused by sin.

Even though one of the most poetic and powerful books of the Old Testament – the book of Job - had exploded this nonsensical myth, nevertheless most Jews of that era, directed by their theological and spiritual teachers, really did believe that if someone was disabled or paralysed or even infected with the first century equivalent of Covid, then this was not due to their medical problems but to the problems of their past sins.

Well of course we in the 21st century can from the benefit of our education and the march of science see clearly and beyond doubt that such views are complete nonsense. But it wasn't nonsense to the Jewish theologians of ancient times. To them, it was a fundamental truth that all illnesses were caused by sin.

Let me pause here to digress for a moment by giving you a general health warning about theologians.

If I was in a boastful mood, which I hope I am not, I might stretch a point and claim to be a theologian myself. I have written one or two books on theology. In my life as a mature student I spent two years at Oxford University reading Theology and miraculously emerged from the examination schools with a First. I am telling you this, not to puff myself up but to emphasise my health warning about theologians.

For we theologians (if I may cheekily embrace myself in this sweeping term) if we are remotely humble know how little we know.

Interesting though learned academic theories about theology may be they are certainly not the only, or indeed the best, route to a relationship with God. Feelings from the heart coming from God are far, far more important than scoring intellectual or academic points about God.

And you can see this clearly from the question asked in the second verse of our reading of Jesus "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

Now hang on a minute here! How can the man that was born blind possibly have committed the sins that were supposed to have made him blind before he was born? How could the Jews believe in prenatal sin?

Well unbelievably and incredibly Jewish theologians did believe in prenatal sin. A big figure in ancient Jewish theology called Rabbi Judah the Patriarch solemnly invented and championed the theory that embryos can sin: That foetuses can sin. Well as they say in the east end "pull the other one".

Long before I read theology I was lucky to go to a school with a great Headmaster, Robert Birley who on the day of my departure addressed the leaving boys with these memorable words: "Boys you have been at this school for five years and I hope you have learned one thing, one great truth above all others which will equip you for your journey through life".

Long dramatic pause as we leaving boys looked at one another wondering what on earth this one great truth or great thing could possibly be.

But our Headmaster went on:

Boys I hope you have learned, how to be able to tell,
"When the other fellow is talking rot".

Now the Jewish theologians of ancient times were talking complete rot about prenatal sin or indeed any other kind of sin being the cause of illnesses or suffering.

And Jesus firmly told the disciples and the rest of the world that the theologians of Israel were talking rot. Because Jesus gave this magisterial answer: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned"

So collapse of those idiotic theological theories but after this rebuke Jesus went on to say something extraordinarily important and arresting, which is of the highest importance to our own lives today.

Jesus then said: "This man was "born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

What did he mean by that?

In John's Gospel, miracles are always seen as signs of the glory and power of God. The writers of the other synoptic gospels had a different point of view. They saw them as miracles, demonstrating the compassion, the mercy or the pity of Jesus towards someone who was suffering. To my mind this is another example of theological nit-picking. For surely there is no fundamental difference between the Fourth Gospel and the other three Gospels. They may look at the same thing in different ways.

For at the heart of John's Gospel lies the supreme truth that the Glory of God lies in his compassion and that he never so fully reveals his glory as when he reveals his pity as he did with the man born blind.

And there's a contemporary message for each and everyone of us from this sign. For many of us from time to time are moved by our faith to do something out of the ordinary because we are inspired by the example of Jesus. If we go out of our way to visit a sick person, or comfort a bereaved person or try to help someone who is suffering or if we reach out in this way to someone in pain or in need, we too are in a small way revealing Gods work, manifesting God's Glory because we are showing what God is like.

The next two verses in our reading are about Gods timing.

He is saying here that he and all his followers must do Gods work while there is time to do it. He is not of course saying that Gods work would end when he himself entered the long dark night and agony of the crucifixion. On the contrary Jesus left behind him the Holy Spirit to empower us to continue Gods work.

Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit remains "The Light of the World". That phrase, "the light of the world" may strike a chord with those of you who have done the Alpha course. For it used to focus in one of the sessions on a famous picture by Holman Hunt which had the title "The Light of the World". That picture portrayed Jesus knocking on a disused broken down cottage door covered in briars and brambles and quoting Revelation 3:19

*"Behold I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door.
I will come in and eat with them and they with me"*

Many hear Jesus' voice. Not so many open the door of their hearts to him.

So don't miss out when you hear the words of the one who was sent to us by God the Father when you feel the power of the Holy Spirit calls you. Timing is of enormous importance on anyone's spiritual journey.

Finally lets look briefly at the last two verses of our reading. When verse 6 says "When he had said this he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the mans eyes" it sounds pretty unhygienic, if not disgusting doesn't it? Why is it in this gospel story?

But we know from the great Roman historians such as Tacitus and Pliny that throughout the Roman Empire Spittle or saliva was almost universally regarded as having miraculous healing properties. Personally I doubt whether Jesus believed in the efficacy of spittle.

But Jesus did believe in using the methods and customs and practices of his time to win over his audience. He knew that he had to gain the confidence of the man born blind he was healing and those watching. In the same way today every doctor and nurse has to win the confidence of their patients.

If we go to have a Covid vaccination today the nurse sits us down, calms us, puts antiseptic on our skin to give us reassurance and then vaccinates us.

All Jesus was doing was using saliva as the confidence builder of his time. No great mystery there. But there is a touch of mystery in the final verse of our reading verse 7: "Go wash in the pool of Siloam – which means Sent". The mystery is solved if we realise that this is a reference back to verse 4 "We must work the works of him who sent me"

There is in this word sent a divine chain of command, which stretches all the way to us here in St. Peter's today. God the Father sent Jesus into the world to reveal his work. Jesus sent the disciples and all his followers (including you and me) out to do his work.

If we feel that we too are sent to do the work of God the Father and God the Son even in the smallest of ways, we too can help to reveal God's Glory. So let's go out and do God's work today and every day.

Amen