

Sermon – The meaning of sight

In Hebrew, the word for eye is the same as the word for a spring of water – you can imagine why, since Hebrew is a very pictorial language, our eyes become springs of water when we cry! In the ancient world they also believed that the eyes were a source of light, rather than the receptors of light from outside. It is easy to see how and why metaphorical connections then arose between sight, light and life.



When the prophet Elisha brings a dead child back to life, he puts his mouth to the child's mouth, his eyes to the child's eyes, and his hands to the child's hands. When he comes back to life, it says the child opened his eyes – **2. Kings 4:32-35**. In passages against idols in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is often noted that although they have eyes, they are unable to see. In other words, they are not alive, and have no power. There is no light or life in their eyes. One psalmist prays "light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death" – **Psalm 13:3**. If God gives light to the eyes, he gives someone life.

Right from the beginning of the Bible, sight is also associated with knowledge – in **Genesis 3:5**, the snake declares that Adam and Eve will have their eyes opened when they eat of the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. When they eat it they see that they are naked. Eyes can also be associated with human opinion and desire in contrast to God's judgement. At the very end of the book of Judges, when everything has collapsed – moral, social and religious chaos abounds – it is stated that, "Everyone did as was right in their own eyes" – **Judges 21:25**. And all the way through the book of Kings, describes almost every king as having done what was evil in the sight of the Lord.

But there is good knowledge, or revelation, associated with sight as well. The psalmist prays in **Psalm 119:18**, 'Open my eyes, That I may see wonderful things!' Let us remember to pray that God will help us to see, to realise, the beautiful and wonderful things around us that God has created and the gifts that God has given to us.

From the second part of the psalm, Psalm 119:37, we hear the plea, 'Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.'

Having to wear masks a lot in the pandemic, we've probably all been aware of trying to read each other's feelings from our eyes! We can do lots of things with our eyes – we can smile or scorn with our eyes. Our eyes can lead us astray and our eyes can be haughty. In Scripture, 'lofty eyes' are used metaphorically to describe those who are arrogant, who look down on other people. Whereas those with 'humble eyes' describe those who do not consider themselves better than others.

More positively, to look towards someone can be an expression of longing or hope, as in the psalmist's declaration of trust "I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come?" – **Psalm 121:1**. Where our spiritual eyes are focused will have a huge bearing on what we see and where and how we walk through life.

The Gospel of John is infused with imagery from our five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch, but sight is the most prominent of these. One of the fascinating things about the language of New Testament Greek is that there is a word for the ability to see, the physical sense of looking at someone or something. But then there are three additional words used for seeing in the sense of perceiving the significance of something. This kind of seeing is more like understanding or knowing. So in **John 1:14**, the Johannine community declare "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have **seen** his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." They haven't just seen his glory – they have really seen and understood and experienced it. They have understood where his glory has come from – God the Father.

For John's Gospel, life and salvation are found in the Word made flesh, God incarnate, and so images of faith in Jesus are often expressed in very bodily ways – people see Jesus, they hear him, they touch him or are touched by him, they are fed by him. More than in any other gospel, the reality of salvation is presented as a choice that people make to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. This story in **John chapter 9** follows on from Jesus' declaration in the previous chapter that he is the light of the world. And we hear this story unfold about a man who is physically blind, healed by Jesus, and then comes to spiritually 'see' who Jesus is. In contrast, the Jewish authorities, although able to physically see, are judged as spiritually blind by the end of the story.

There are several parts of this story that are intriguing to look at. On one hand it follows the usual pattern in John of an event, followed by dialogue, followed by some teaching. On the other hand, this is a healing that happens to someone who hasn't even asked for it! The blind man is discussed by the disciples, Jesus makes mud (something he shouldn't have done on the Sabbath), puts it on the man's eyes, then tells him to go and wash. There's no conversation between them until much later. Then Jesus disappears for most of the chapter, while the dialogue unfolds – **John 9:1-7**.

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In first-century Judaism, it was quite a common idea that illnesses or disabilities were a result of someone's sin. This is quite clearly refuted by the story here. It is rather how someone reacts to Jesus that creates the judgement of whether or not they are saved. People either run towards the light or want to hide in the darkness. The man in the story gradually gains a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. First, he refers to him as "the man called Jesus", then he identifies him as a prophet, and then he acknowledges Jesus to be the Son of Man. Those who can really see are those who see and understand the revelation of God in his works through Jesus.

The healing of the blind man appears in the catacombs in Rome in the frescoes from the 2nd century. It spoke to early Christians as a symbol of faith and new life. He moves from darkness into light by his healing, and also moves through the story to his faith in Jesus.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus says "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day" – **John 6:40**. And then, that no-one has seen the Father except the one who comes from God – **John 6:46**. But some have seen Jesus and not believed.

How much harder is it then for those of us born 2000 years later! We are asked to believe without having seen Jesus. Near the end of John's Gospel, when Jesus shows doubting Thomas the marks in his hands and the wound in his side, he says "Blessed are those who do not see and yet still believe" – John 20:29. And we have been given these accounts and stories, so that we may believe, and through believing have life in his name.

Just as John's audience was invited through this story to make a choice about believing in Jesus, so we are also invited to over-hear the conversations between the man born blind, his parents, the crowd and the Jewish authorities. And we are presented with the choice again, to believe that Jesus is the one who reveals God to us.

In the Hebrew Bible sides with the poor and needy – God gives Israel laws that ensure they provide for the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. In **Psalms 146:8** it declares, "The LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous."

In one of the prophetic visions, Isaiah declares, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped" – **Isaiah 35:5**. It is part of Israel's commission as a light to the Gentiles, that they will open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

God promises this: "I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them" – Isaiah 42:16.

This was God's commission to the people of Israel, and then the words from Isaiah were spoken by Jesus in the temple, affirming that this was also part of his work and mission: "The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" – **Luke 4:18**.

The story of Ernst Christoffel is particularly inspiring as a witness to Jesus' concern for those who were poor and marginalised because of their physical disabilities. His eyes were firmly fixed on Jesus as the author and perfecter of his faith. Thanks to Christoffel's relentless vision and work, millions of people with all kinds of disabilities are being helped by the work of Christian Blind Mission.

A fitting reflection for this was written by St Teresa of Avila in the 16th century: "Christ has no body now upon the Earth but yours; no feet but yours.

Yours, my brothers and sisters, are the eyes through which Christ's compassion has to look upon the world, and yours are the lips with which his love has to speak. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless people now, and yours the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Christ has no body now upon the Earth but yours."

Her reflection is a reminder of what our eyes can do. If our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we will be encouraged to look with hope, longing and expectation for what he will do. Whether or not we have physical sight, we can keep praying for the gift of spiritual sight, for our ability to see and understand more about God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. And to have Jesus' eyes of compassion to look upon those in the world who need our prayers, our help, and whatever resources we can give.

Let us pray...

Lord, God, champion of the poor, protector and healer of those who cannot see, or hear or walk. Give us your eyes to see, we pray, that we might look with compassion and love on all your children. May our eyes not be distracted by empty things, but be set on Jesus. Give us a vision of your kingdom, and give us wisdom to know how we can work towards that together, guided by your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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