

3 March 2008

'Eyes wide shut'

John 9:1-41

Professor John Hull is one of this country's most distinguished Christian educationalists. From being Head of the Religious Education Department in a London Grammar School, in 1966 he moved to Birmingham to work in Westhill College of Education as a Lecturer in Divinity, where he trained religious education teachers. Two years later he was appointed to be Lecturer in Religious Education at the University of Birmingham, being promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1978, to Reader in 1986, and in 1989 becoming the first Professor of Religious Education in a British university. In addition he became Dean of the Faculty of Education in 1990, and held this post for three and a half years.

Hull's glittering academic career continued. Following retirement from full-time work, he was appointed Honorary Professor of Practical Theology in the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham. Here he works with candidates for the Christian ministry, rather than with future religious education school teachers. He is teaching courses on the theology of mission, and on the church in the modern world. At the time of his appointment, John Hull said: "I am delighted to have this opportunity for new work in this fine institution, and since my own roots are in all three of the churches represented in Queen's, namely, the Methodist, United Reformed, and Anglican traditions, I feel as if I have come home".

But these are not all John Hull's accomplishments. He is the General Secretary of the International Seminar for Religious Education and Values, a group of over 100 religious education research scholars from 25 countries, which he helped found in 1977. For many years he was Editor of the British Journal of Religious Education, and has twice been President of the National Christian Education Council, which was previously the British Sunday School Union. He has also actively supported several organisations, including Christian Aid, the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and Church Action on Poverty, as well as being a member of the Labour Party. He is also Chair of the Social Justice Committee at his local church. So John Hull has been a busy man!

So why am I telling you all this? Most of us are never likely to meet this man in the flesh, although we may occasionally hear him on the radio. But the reason I'm tell you is this: John Hull is totally blind, and has had no light sensation since 1983. He first developed cataract in both eyes when he was a boy of thirteen and was blind for several months. Although his sight was restored at that time, he suffered a series of retinal detachments, which after several operations, led to blindness in 1980. He was able to keep working by carefully organising his office, but coping at home, with five children who would leave toys and books in unexpected places, was far more difficult.

John has written movingly of his blindness. He points out that just closing our eyes does not give a true impression of a blind person's experience, because you will still have a seeing person's brain behind those closed eyes. He found that, as his detached retina progressed from tunnel vision to total blindness, John's memory-bank of images became increasingly historical, and in the case of his youngest child, he had no visual image at all, only what he could pick up by sound, touch and smell. He also reports the enormous social disadvantage of being unsighted: people can see him coming and going, but for him people may appear and disappear with little or no warning.

The story we have read today is all about a blind man who Jesus healed. Nothing strange about that, you might think - unless you don't believe in the stories of Jesus' miracles, of course! What the narrative asks us to believe is certainly extraordinary: for not only was this man blind, but he had been from birth. There was no medical condition, either simple or progressive, which Jesus could reverse; the causes of his blindness could hardly have been psychosomatic. We are dealing here with someone who has a built-in disability which medicine, even today, would find intractable. Yet Jesus, we are told, instantly gives him sight.

Now, the problem with all references to blind people in the Gospels is that they are described as being beyond the pale, outside the followers of Jesus. It isn't until their sight is granted that they become disciples; it's. The outstanding case is Bartimaeus in Mark 10. He is described as a blind beggar, sitting by the roadside, who heard that Jesus and his disciples were about to pass by. The climax of this story tells us that his sight was restored, and he followed Jesus in the way. In today's story, it is not at all clear if the man healed by Jesus followed him at all; in fact, when he is brought before the Pharisees, he seems pretty vague as to the identity of his healer. He must have been the only person in town who didn't know it was Jesus!

The issue in this story is rather different. In fact it is whether the commonly-held view of Jewish folk-religion was true or not. For everybody who knew this man was quick to point the finger: if he was blind, there had to be a reason for it. Either he was a terrible sinner, and the blindness was God's judgement upon him; or his condition was due to the his parents' sins. Well, those who knew that the man had been born blind could hardly say that he had committed some awful sin before his birth; so obviously the guilty party must have been his father. His misdemeanours must have been bad enough to warrant this appalling consequence for his son. That's what people thought.

Well, I can see how this view had taken hold. It derives from some passages in Exodus which talk about God visiting the sin of people on the third and fourth generations of their family. And these are not obscure texts, in fact one of them actually comes as part of the Ten Commandments, so they would have been well known in Jesus' day.

Now there can be some truth in sins being passed down through the generations: for instance, a drug addict can give birth to a child who is addicted themselves and who is then brought up in a social milieu which leads them down the same path. Equally, there may be awful consequences for the children of someone who has picked up Aids or another sexually-transmitted disease through promiscuity (very sadly, because it's not the child's fault). In a less physical sphere, we all know families where negative attitudes and deep hurts have been deliberately passed on to children and grandchildren. And, on a wider canvas, the sins of one epoch of society - such as slavery or exploitative colonialism - can have repercussions that will reverberate for centuries.

That may all be true; yet it does seem to me that none of it has a great deal to do with God. For surely we are dealing with human activity and its effects on subsequent generations. I am quite sure that none of us would want to paint a picture of a God who deliberately punishes a person for something done, say, by his great-grandfather. That image is, at best bizarre, and more likely, deeply repugnant. It makes us ask how anyone could be born into the world knowing that he or she was already under a shadow, that they can never make good because God is waiting to bring them down because of something that happened 50 years ago? Of course our forebears' lives affect us; but ultimately we are all responsible before God for our own lives alone. I am quite sure that is what Jesus was saying through this miracle and its aftermath.

Well, we don't think like first century Jews nowadays - or do we? For we know that blindness in the Gospels represents sin and unbelief, and sight represents faith and discipleship. And this still leaves blind people today in a difficult position, especially within the Church. Even our hymn books make things difficult for them: "Lord, I was blind", they say, "I could not see the radiant beauty of thy face". If the hymn said, "My eyes are closed, I could not see", there would be no problem but, as long as we go on singing about blindness and tying it up with a lack of faith, we may well be placing a burden upon people who are literally blind.

And this poses a particular problem if a Christian today loses their sight. Of course loss of sight will involve all sorts of physical and probably emotional difficulties; but there is an additional problem, too. If, for all one's life as a Christian, one has been soaked in the symbolism of blindness as sin, does this mean that I, now blind myself, have been plunged into sin? "Of course not", we would reply: and yet this kind of thinking may well remain at the back of our minds. Alongside this, there is another pressure which is often placed upon blind Christians: that they should seek miraculous healing, and if that does not happen, or if they refuse to go forward in a healing service, then they are somehow confirmed in their sinfulness. In some literal-minded congregations, a blind Christian is a puzzle or even a reproach at their

lack of faith.

So where does all this leave us? It is quite clear that the Bible is not a politically correct document: as ancient literature, it could not possibly be (and, in fact, there are times when it challenges modern notions, and we must listen to it). It was woman theologians who first drew attention to the way in which some aspects of Scripture, at least, marginalised them; and now disabled people are joining in. In many ways matters came to a head at the time of the evangelist Morris Cerullo's crusade in London around 1990. His posters promised that the blind would see and the lame would walk, complete with pictures of discarded glasses and crutches. Disabled Christians felt insulted and protested vigorously (as well as avowed secularists); the advertisements were withdrawn.

But perhaps one good point did come out of this row: it brought issues of healing and disability to the fore. It became very clear that people with physical limitations (and even what used to be called mental handicaps) are still loved by God. They are not under condemnation, they are not specially sinful, they can be saved equally with anyone else and they can play their part in the world. They need not necessarily pray for healing: in fact, they may have a ministry of emotional healing themselves, ministering to those who are frustrated and angry at God for their own conditions. And they, like every Christian, need to see Jesus in their spirit and can look forward to perfect healing in glory.

The Church's folk-theology, just like Jewish religion in the first century, may - quite unintentionally - make us think of certain people as less than fully human. That is a tendency we must fight against whenever we can. We don't know why some people are blind, or have spina bifida, or learning difficulties, or diabetes. In an imperfect world, these things happen, and we cannot say that they are either God's fault nor the fault of the individuals concerned.

So what the Church must do is neither marginalise nor patronise disabled people - or, indeed, anyone who is in any way "different" from the broad mass of humanity. The Church - above all institutions - must offer them equal opportunities and self-esteem; it must help them work through the particular issues that their disability may have left them with; above all, it must see them as fellow-members of God's family. Even if this blind man had not been healed, he could have followed Jesus. I am sure he would have been the first of many.