

## **Blindness**

*[Jesus said to the blind man,] “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.”’ Luke 18.41–42*

## **Miracles**

Jesus healed a blind man. That is called a *miracle*, because it makes us *admire* God. Most people would say that it is scientifically impossible to heal blindness, because there has been an irreversible change to the eye and the nerves. But there are some exceptions: if there is an hysterical or psychosomatic illness, which meant that the blind man was not physically ill, but for some reason would not face up to the fact that he could see. Or maybe a small physical problem could be healed by a sudden shock. Science cannot say, ‘This could never happen’; only, ‘This happens very rarely, and we cannot yet explain what happened in this case.’ So perhaps it is best to say it was a miracle, and as yet we cannot explain it.

## **Metaphor**

The word ‘blindness’ is often used in the Bible as a metaphor for being unable to see the truth when it is staring us in the face. Many people could not see, meaning could not understand, that Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus describes them as spiritually blind. But we must be careful about using that metaphor, if there are physically blind people present, as it could be seen as insulting. Blind people were outcasts from society when Jesus was alive, so I doubt if the opportunity for this type of misunderstanding could have arisen then. Jesus was always careful to treat sick people with dignity and respect. But he may have performed a few miracles so as to convince people that spiritual blindness, too, can be cured.

## **Respect**

It would be a tragic mistake for us to promise healing to a blind person these days, unless we were absolutely sure their physical condition was curable, or that might break their hearts with disappointment if it didn’t work. Instead, Jesus would want us to treat people with disabilities in a caring way that builds up their self-respect. We must speak to blind people often, having first told them who we are, instead of ignoring them as though they were not really there. Simply getting from one place to another presents many challenges to the blind, so we should praise them for the way they manage it, and offer gentle help in getting about if they say they need it. Many blind people have a high level of intelligence and skills, so we should help them to find suitable work, and be sure the employer makes necessary changes to the working conditions so that they are not looked down on by their colleagues. And finally, if they have a guide-dog, we should help the animal, too, and praise them for the wonderful job they do.

## **Church**

A blind professor of theology, Dr John Hull, said in the *Church Times* a few years ago that ‘On the whole, the Church doesn’t cope very well with disability.’ He reprimanded those who imagine that the imitation of Christ involves working miracles as Jesus did. He continued, ‘The true miracle ... is when disabled people are fully integrated into Church life and accepted exactly as they are.’ He was right. So I want to ask you: is this church building as disabled-friendly as it could be? With large print hymn sheets for the partially sighted; a good amplifier and a hearing loop for the deaf, ramps for those in wheelchairs and those with Zimmer-frames, and somewhere on the seats for people with walking sticks to hang them up? Have you provided accessible disabled toilets in accordance with the current regulations? The

respect and care which we have recognised that the blind deserve, people with other disabilities are entitled to as well.

### **Fellowship**

Above all, is your fellowship inviting to people with disabilities? Do people go up to them and show them that they are welcome? Are you friendly, so that folk with disabilities can feel they have a group of people they can chat with, whatever the weather, without travelling too far to specialised facilities dedicated to such people. If we are to follow the example of Jesus, the least we can do is to care for people who struggle in the way they would wish us to. If we don't see the necessity of that, perhaps it is we who are spiritually blind, and the ones with disabilities are those who can see the truth which is hidden from us.

*A Sermon by Rev. Michael Counsell at St Peter's, Harborne  
6 July 2014*