

**The Subversion of 'Sin' (John 9: 1-41)**

© Sarah Bachelard

Our theme this Lent is 'Touchstones of Redemption'. We're exploring what redemption is and how we can expect it to change us. Last week, we saw that one key effect of the redemptive process, as our tradition understands it, is to enable a movement from the outside in. In relation to other people, a sign of our redemption is that those we had previously deemed outsiders are recognized as potential insiders. We come to see *them* as like *us*, equally loved, equally invited to fullness of life and intimacy with God. Similarly, in relation to God, redemption involves a movement from the outside in, from an externally mediated relationship to one that comes alive within us. In last week's passage from John 4, Jesus spoke of those who are 'true worshippers' no longer having to go to designated holy places to meet with God; rather God is worshipped in Spirit and truth, God is experienced, no longer as outside us, but as living water gushing up from within to eternal life.

This week's reading brings us to a related but further outworking of this Christian understanding of redemption. It concerns the radical transformation of our understanding of sin. Theologian James Alison's brilliant commentary on our passage summarises the shift in a nutshell: 'Sin ceases to be a *defect* which excludes, and comes to be participation in the *mechanism* of exclusion'.<sup>1</sup> Tonight, we're going to unpack this shift.

Let's start, then, with a conception of 'sin' as a 'defect' that excludes. This is how Jesus' disciples are seeing things when they first encounter the man born blind. 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' In the Judaism of Jesus' day, only people without 'blemish', without any kind of physical disability,

---

<sup>1</sup> James Alison, 'The man blind from birth and the Creator's subversion of sin', in *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp.3-26, p.17. My reading of this passage is entirely indebted to Alison's exegesis.

were permitted to serve as priests, or participate ritually in the life of Israel. For the blind man, this might seem a merely cultic exclusion. But such cultic exclusions always have social consequences. As Alison points out – to the extent that a physical characteristic excludes you from participating in the ritual action that makes you and your people ‘good’, it renders you by definition morally suspect.

The logic of this thought pattern is that if you are born blind and therefore excluded from the possibility of really being ‘good’, then there must be ‘sin’, some kind of moral fault, in the background. The same kind of logic is alive and well today – we call it blaming the victim.<sup>2</sup> If someone is sexually assaulted, she must have done something to provoke it; if someone is poor, they must have failed to succeed because of laziness or irresponsibility; if someone is gay, and therefore excluded from the possibility of really being ‘good’ according to their religious tradition, then being gay must itself be a sign of ‘sin’. On this view of things, the disability, characteristic or misfortune which *results* in your exclusion or condemnation, is taken as the justifying *reason* for your exclusion or condemnation. ‘Who sinned, who is to blame, that this man was born blind?’

Well, Jesus simply refuses this way of conceiving the issue. He proceeds to act so as to enable the blind man’s access to fuller life. But what’s critical here is that he does so, **not** by getting the man to confess any supposed sin (since there was none), but simply by healing his blindness, addressing his misfortune. Just as God had created humanity out of the dust of the ground, so Jesus spits on the dust to make mud and spread it on the man’s eyes. Symbolically, in other words, he completes his creation. Jesus then sends him to the pool of Siloam, where his ritual washing simultaneously completes the restoration of his sight and to fellowship in his community. This movement of restoration to full humanity is powerfully shown in the text. Up until this point, the blind man hasn’t said anything – he’s always been a ‘him’ or ‘that one’, defined solely by his blindness and his position as a beggar. Even when he begins to see, people carry on talking about ‘him’ as if he isn’t there. ‘Some

---

<sup>2</sup> Alison, ‘The man blind from birth and the Creator’s subversion of sin’, p.6.

were saying, “It is he”. Others were saying, “No, it is someone like him”. But then comes the moment when the former blind man finds his own voice, “It is I”<sup>3</sup> – and thereafter, he becomes the subject, the agent of his own story.

So far, so good – and if it stopped there, it could have looked like a happy ending. But the problem, religiously speaking, is that it leaves too many loose ends. After all, if the former blind man turns out to have been just – well – blind, and not sinful, then how are the rest of them supposed to understand sin now? How are they supposed to know their own goodness, if they can’t define it against his badness? There must be some mistake. He can’t just jump out of his category like this. The Pharisees begin to dig deeper.

First, they have a go at making the act of the healing itself problematic. After all, it occurred on the Sabbath. Some of them therefore said: ‘This man [Jesus], is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath’. Others were uneasy about this ‘solution’: ‘How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?’ And they were divided’. Except the last thing the religious people can afford at this point is to be divided from each other. So – seeking to preserve their unanimity in goodness – they go back to the former blind man, to ask his opinion of Jesus: ‘He is a prophet’, he says. That’s not what they want to hear, so next, the Pharisees have a go at denying the healing ever happened. They would not believe he had been born blind, until (unfortunately for their agenda) the former blind man’s parents confirm it.

A second time, then, they go back to the former blind man, trying to get him to disavow – not so much the healing itself, as its goodness and the goodness of the man who performed it. ‘Give glory to God!’, they say. In other words, tread carefully here, say what you’re supposed to say. ‘We know that this man is a sinner’. Do you now?, says the man formerly blind. I don’t know about that. ‘One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see’. And that’s pretty good! Foo-ey! – say the Pharisees – OK, tell us again. What exactly did he do? As if, remarks Alison, they’re

---

<sup>3</sup> Alison, ‘The man blind from birth and the Creator’s subversion of sin’, p.7.

looking to detect something 'formally sinful' in the act of the cure itself, something that 'would allow them to interpret the act as a sin'.<sup>4</sup>

The man formerly blind gets a whiff of their desperation, and begins to ridicule their efforts. 'I've told you already and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' This doesn't go so well. They begin much more aggressively to revile him. Perhaps they would have let him in, if only he'd consent to his label, if only he'd be a penitent sinner. And what follows is an exchange that reveals just how much they want to maintain their difference, their distance from him. Using the word 'we' to exclude him, they say: '**You** are his disciple, but **we** are disciples of Moses'. **We** know that God has spoken to Moses but we do not know where [this man Jesus] comes from'. But the former blind man simply refuses to be excluded again. He answers in terms of an "us", counting himself in with the Pharisees: 'We know [that is, we all know] that God does not listen to sinners, but to those who worship him and do his will ... If this man were not from God, he could do nothing'.

'The logic is perfect', as Alison notes, 'but we're beyond the stage where logic matters'.<sup>5</sup> The Pharisees are by now rabidly committed to their version of their own goodness – and they're desperate to resist any subversion of it. What follows is completely irrational – in Alison's words 'a tornado of expulsion'<sup>6</sup>: "'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out'. The exquisite irony is that the man born blind begins excluded from Israel, supposedly by reason of his disability, which is interpreted as sin; he ends excluded from Israel for no other reason than that he will no longer consent to be interpreted as sin. The original justifying reason for his exclusion, blindness, has gone, but the mechanism of exclusion remains. The mechanism by which the self-proclaimed righteous seek to secure their goodness over against those who are not good, and can never be.

---

<sup>4</sup> Alison, 'The man blind from birth and the Creator's subversion of sin', pp.12-13.

<sup>5</sup> Alison, 'The man blind from birth and the Creator's subversion of sin', p.14.

<sup>6</sup> Alison, 'The man blind from birth and the Creator's subversion of sin', p.14.

This is the mechanism Jesus is subverting. And this is why, in the Christian vision, 'sin can no longer be conceived as a defect justifying exclusion'. Rather sin is nothing other than participation in the mechanism of exclusion. 'Sin is resistance, in the name of God, to the creative work of God which seeks to include us all'.<sup>7</sup> This is the judgement Jesus comes to make – so that those who do not see may see, and those who think they see may be revealed as having been blind all along.

As for us – well, our redemption involves the slow process of coming to recognise the ways we too participate in this mechanism. Not necessarily in such gross or obvious ways. But more subtly – through the systems or social groups or chat rooms to which we belong, through our flashes of self-righteousness, and in our tendency to condemn, exclude, and make wrong those parts of ourselves we deem defective or unsatisfactory.

I am the light of the world, Jesus said. Especially in times such as we are living now, where the propensity to blame, exclude and condemn hovers not far below the surface of our common life, let us pray that Christ's light guides our seeing and makes merciful our gaze.

---

<sup>7</sup> Alison, 'The man blind from birth and the Creator's subversion of sin', p.17.