

I can see clearly, **John 9.1-41**  
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In these past weeks of Lent, we've been reading the discourses in John, and noting how in each discourse Jesus challenges people's taken-for-granted assumptions about aspects of the spiritual life.

In the conversation with Nicodemus (John 3), he challenges the assumption that salvation is a birthright or something we earn or achieve... he speaks of the need to be born from above, to undergo the work of the Spirit... to receive salvation as a gift from God.

In the conversation with the woman at the well (John 4), he challenges assumptions about who and what matters to God - who the gift of the kingdom, of eternal life is available to, what true worship consists of and where (and how) it takes place... The gift is for everyone – Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles... all matter to God, 'all who are thirsty, let them come to me and drink' Worship on this mountain or in the temple? It doesn't matter, what matters is that we worship 'in spirit and in truth', that we give ourselves in worship... 'a living sacrifice' is how Paul describes it.

In the conversations in today's story – with disciples, the blind man and the Pharisees, Jesus challenges assumptions about sight and sin – about who *really* can see, and what really constitutes sin. In the story, the blind man sees ever more clearly who Jesus is, and *sees through* the mechanism of judgement and exclusion of the so-called 'religious' authorities. In the beginning of the story, sin is understood as a moral failing that explains

disability and difficulty. ‘*Rabbi, who sinned that this man was born blind?*’ the disciples ask. Neither, says Jesus, this isn’t about sin, it’s about creation being unfinished, incomplete... and he takes dust from the ground and spits on it to make mud – *adamah* in Hebrew ( a play on the word *adam* – man) and he rubs it on this man’s (adam’s) eyes and he sees – he is complete. And, as a result, the religious authorities are thrown into a tizz! It happens on the Sabbath, which means (taken-for-granted) it can’t be right!! And so they go to enormous lengths to prove that *it* is wrong, that Jesus is wrong, that the blind man is wrong. As the saying goes, ‘there are none as blind as those who *will not see!*’ In the end, we realise that the real sin is not some moral failing; the real sin is in refusing to see, refusing to be changed, and in remaining active in mechanisms that judge, exclude and cast out fragile, fellow human beings...

This lent, the readings are challenging our taken-for-granted assumptions. And, this lent, COVID-19 (coronavirus) has taken over from the drought and bushfires and is doing the same thing – challenging... disrupting... upsetting taken-for-granted assumptions. The assumption that the basic structures of our economy and social life are unshakable – that supermarket shelves will always bulge with whatever we want when we want it, that we can go where we want (to work, to school, on a holiday, to church!!) when we want; that we can meet with who we want when we want; that we can gather here at St Ninian’s and carry on with programs as we’ve always done. Two weeks ago, I could not (would not) have believed that I’d be here (in the hall) telling you that we cannot gather on this site, in our familiar and loved setting, for Sunday worship for the foreseeable future, that it would be too risky and irresponsible for us to continue doing so.

This health crisis is shaking modern lifestyle to its foundations, dramatically and rapidly. As you know many restrictions have already been imposed to try to contain the spread of this new and dangerous virus, and these are changing (becoming more restrictive) almost daily at present. We are not immune to these and that's why the church council (in line with the recommendation from Synod and Presbytery, and in concert with other denominations) has made the very difficult decision to suspend worship until the current threat recedes.

So, our perspective is being shaken, as was the blind man's and the Pharisees. Blind spots concerning the viability of a way of life are being revealed and new possibilities are becoming visible.

So, what are we starting to see?

Well, we're being reminded that church isn't confined to worship on this mountain, in this temple, on this site. That the body of Christ, that the community of St Ninian's, is (and needs to be) more than a physical gathering on Sundays. Gathered or dispersed, we are called to be a community of care, of prayer... of faith. And, in difficult times such as these, we need to be creative and committed to the wellbeing of one another and to persevering as disciples of the living Christ. I know that St Ninian's is a resilient community, it's one of your great qualities, and now we're being called to express this resilience in new and different ways.

It's a fact, that we cannot worship together as normal for some time, and that we won't have our normal Easter services, for example. Other activities, too, will be suspended. So, how might we continue to nurture and sustain our faith and community?

I've had a few thoughts and I hope (in coming days) we can all contribute and participate in this. Here's a few things I will seek to do.

- Church open each week day from 11.00am - 3.00pm for people to drop in and pray. (Others may be able to help with this on the weekend as well).
- 12.30 silent meditation weekdays in church (with all doors open and plenty of room to spread out)
- Post a regular reflection on the blog (on the webpage) and to email it around to all on computer.
- Prepare a special liturgy of *Worship for Dispersed People* - a weekly service sheet with prayers, reading and reflective exercise (which again can be emailed around, with hard copies delivered to those who need it – some of you may be able to help with that)

As for you? Two things in the first instance:

- Watch and pray (as Jesus calls us to in Lent)
- Watch out and care for one another. How? Ring rounds... two or three others each week to check in (e.g. those who normally sit near you) – reading some of the reflections that come around; sharing what you're experiencing and learning...

I'd like to close this reflection with two quotes.

1. From Presbytery minister – John Squires

As we walk this wilderness journey, there will be real grief and loss in letting go of the things that usually bring us together. There will be real fear and anxiety that comes with physical distancing. This may take on added dimensions for people who already live with anxiety. We know that we are walking into difficult times. We know, also, the promise of God's presence in the midst of this.

2. Adapted from Laurence Freeman (WCCM)

There is another **response to this crisis**, and to handling its fear and uncertainties, we can practise faith, hope and trust, we can **deepen our own interior peace** and bring it to others. We can be part of a response that makes a difference to those around us even if we are physically separated. Social distancing can bring us closer together spiritually. We only need to go deeper. **To go deeper we need only to be still.** Prayer, being silent and still in the presence of love is the way to deep peace. Maybe if we use this opportunity, we will not only get through this storm. We will also remember, after the present fear has passed, the lesson of how to live a good life better.