

# Mothering Sunday 2023

1 Samuel 16:1-13

John 9

Giving away her child must be the hardest decision a mother could make. We have two somewhat unsettling Bible glimpses of motherhood in today's readings. Samuel has been inspired by God's Spirit in a rare and intense way such that he can converse frankly with God and perceive God's will for who should be anointed king. Samuel's spiritual character was shaped for this moment from a very young age as apprentice to the angular, failed parent, the clumsy priest Eli, to whom Hannah, Samuel's mother, had entrusted her only son. What a safeguarding risk. What a letting go. Take a parent's hard decision about whether a boarding school is right for their child and multiply it tenfold. But there was something about the letting-go parenthood of Hannah and Eli that prepared Samuel to be acutely aware of the parenting of God.

We only meet David's father Jesse, not his mother, but hearing the story on Mothering Sunday we might imagine her seeing her youngest son anointed King. What fear and pride, what confusion. How would she then relate to all her other sons? How did she measure each one's stature? Was there a favourite. I love the witty way the writer shows God's insight different to, but echoed in ours. "God does not judge by appearances, but by what's in the heart," the text booms. But when he gets to David the narrator says he was ruddy and handsome and had lovely eyes. "Appearances don't matter....oh all right they do a bit." As we often find in Hebrew storytelling, comedy about the contradictions in God reflect ours and make us reflect on them. We can imagine Mrs Jesse, like many a parent, saying "I don't have a favourite...Oh all right, maybe I do...a bit."

Then we meet the parents of the man, named only according to his disability: the "man born blind," or his economic status: the man who "used to beg." Imagine their feelings. Perhaps you can because you, too, have a child who lives with disability of some kind. Think of the economic worries for someone at that time unable to work. Imagine how as they aged they would worry about his life after they have gone. Imagine their excitement at his healing, quickly dashed by the Pharisees who present them with another economic challenge: expulsion from the Temple and therefore much societal interaction. They are so afraid that, when interrogated they distance themselves from their son: "Ask him. He is of age."

Happening to read them on the modern festival of Mothering Sunday, both stories help us to feel the compromise, fear, helplessness and letting go that is built into human parenting. With Hannah in the background of the Samuel story, we feel the power of longing for motherhood, accentuated and contrasted by the ache of letting go that motherhood always entails from the very outset. This primeval human tension is vividly displayed and explored in scripture.

All the tension and sacrifice of parenthood, often fraught, reflected back to us when we wonder about our heavenly parent, is not idealised in Scripture. This is not a sugary day of disingenuous compliments, but a day of prayer in the light of scripture and a day of thanksgiving for whatever has been good in our experience of parenting; of candidness about its flaws, and search for wisdom about how we all relate. The big story with both readings is God's ability to make blessing, glory, witness and life emerge defiantly from our complexity and confusion. The Spirit falls mightily on David and the forgotten shepherd becomes a destiny shaping king. The blind man can see and is a teacher of the faith to this day.

We should be shocked by the contrast between the life-stunting meanness of the Pharisees and the life giving, light shedding effect of relationship with Jesus. Then, the shock having opened up the possibilities we are invited to consider our relationship to power and to disability.

I wonder if you've heard the comedian Rosie Jones who lives with cerebral palsy. Her speech is slowed and strongly accented by the illness and she uses both to great effect, drawing out punch lines, making us wait. Her observational comedy is, you can imagine, incisive and often painfully funny. Likewise Lee Ridley, known as "the lost voice guy," has no speech and so his observational comedy is mediated through the deadpan, almost lifeless artificial computerised voice. Again, the slow deliberate pace is worked to great effect. While plenty of their humour is about the stuff of any ordinary life, they came to mind today as we meet a comedian who used to be disabled and now isn't. The man formerly known as blind beggar is very quick, hilariously exposing the Pharisees' fascination with Jesus and the weakness of their ethical framework.

"You do seem interested in him. Do you want to become his disciples?"

"Well here's a funny thing. He cures the blind but you think he's a sinner."

We can imagine how his timing, his working of irony and his observation, have been sharpened and trained by years of listening to passers-by, years of prejudice encountered, years of waiting for crumbs of blessing in busy public places, years of hearing the conversations of beggars, Pharisees and everyone in between in the liminal place between house of prayer and busy street.

Like the woman at the well, he is an overlooked theologian, whom Jesus draws into conversation, swiftly forming a life-giving meaningful relationship, highlighting the dysfunction of the relationships of the most respectable people in society. It re-locates ethical authority away from the institution, showing theology and ethics are to be shaped in relationship with God as met in Jesus, and this can be for anyone: serial monogamist Samaritan woman, disabled beggar, and yes, even an embarrassed highly qualified teacher (Nicodemus) is still not excluded.

Reactions to the man's healing are strong. When his neighbours brought him to the Pharisees, "brought" is the same word as when they *brought* the woman caught in adultery. There is an aggression here; a desire for someone to be in trouble. How revolted we often feel at neediness, but how much more offensive is a disabled person being healed. A figure of insult has been taken away. Someone we can blame for their misfortune audaciously gets better. They will no longer serve as a waste bin for our own regret and disappointment. How annoying. The authorities' lack of care about his disability is displayed in their lack of delight in his healing. All they can fixate on is the supposed breaking of the Sabbath. The desperation of their investigation is conveyed in the repetition, and is hilariously echoed today in a government's panicky terror of footballers.

The Pharisees are in desperate need of comedians to highlight their contradictions, but it's clearly the last thing they want. Their parenting of the faith community was grumpy and impatient, projecting their insecurities back onto those whom they should protect. The fall-out from their unresolved issues is borne by this disabled, now healed man. They barked at him "Give glory to God," then told him off for being cured. Their catastrophic loss of perspective reveals hearts incapable of anything so playful as glorifying God.

In contrast to their power-imbalanced relationship, Jesus through whom the world was made performed a priestly rite with the spittle and mud, and empowered the disabled man. He *sent* him to the pool called *Sent*. (Siloam is translated by John, so he wants us to notice.) In his disability, he is treated as having agency. Jesus doesn't only do for, or to him. The faithful life invited by John's Gospel is partnership, in the grace of God. The man comes back able to see, but of course has never seen Jesus who's slipped away. He can't identify him.

When this began, with the disciples' question about cause, Jesus imagined the man's disability and said the *cause* is dull. The *effect* is something we can do something about. He discerned what his Heavenly parent was prompting him to do and, anticipating the impact of light falling on the man's retina, messages flashing to the brain, Jesus is moved to say one of his best ever lines: "I am the light of the world."

[Jesus heals the blind man. We need to pause for a moment to say this is not ethically straight forward. At All Saints we were taught by our friend John Hull to think carefully about this. His blindness was not healed. There is something questionable and arguably patronising to assume healing is the best and only response to disability. [See the "shekels for an ex-leper" scene in the film *The Life of Brian*.] John's response to deepening blindness showed us vividly by his ever more penetrating perception that with effort and with God we can make the *effect* even more interesting than some imagined healing. Accepting that important caveat, Jesus did heal and did so partly in order to show the lack of insight of those who claimed to see.]

Later, on news of the expulsion reached Jesus and he sought out the man, John establishing for us readers that our relationship with Jesus defines us more than our relationship with human institutions. Picking up the man's comedy, like a jazz musician improvising on a theme, Jesus works Isaiah's jokes about the blind seeing and the learned being blind. With a final flourish, the indignant Pharisees ask "we're not blind, surely?" Jesus stops the funny tune with a dead pan bald statement: "Your sin remains."

Think that over as a punch line. "If you claim to be able to see, that makes you culpable. You have guilt tripped the parents of a disabled man, telling them they were sinful. What kind of struggle have they had anyway? All parents feel guilty. Is this my fault... should I have... isn't it hard enough, let alone when your child has a disability to live with? All the prejudice the man's experienced, even perpetuating shame and blame after he's received his sight. You claim to be able to see. All that pile of shaming, belittling crap is on you. Not his sin, not the parents' sin, but your sin remains."

Perhaps we are prepared now for prayer through this coming week, our eyes opened to so many themes and contradictions in relationship.

Who today is in the same condition as the Pharisees with their mean answer to the disciples' question about sin and blame? Who, by contrast, may be powerless or considered disabled, but is more perceptive and indeed receptive than the wealthy and powerful? Whose hardship has honed their wit? How far have our attitudes to disability really advanced since that day in the temple? In terms of last week's reflection on missing voices, it is for people who live with disabilities who are qualified to answer that question.

Remembering King David's parents they might lead you into prayer for any who are proud of their offspring; any who have to deal with the fallout from fame; any who struggle to treat their different children even-handedly.

As the healed man's parents seem to push him away at a crucial moment, pray for any parents holding on too tight, and any not holding on enough to their offspring. That could be prayer for anyone trying to find the elusive parental balance. Although this man did nothing wrong, perhaps you might pray for a while for any parent who feels compromised by, ashamed, or afraid of what their child has become. Expulsion from the Temple was a harsh sentence for being healed. We might pray for anyone whose innocent offspring are in prison or accused of wrongdoing. We surely pray for the families of political prisoners the world over.

Picturing the hard hearted Pharisees, in their terrible loss of perspective, we pray for anyone (could it include me?) who meets disability with prejudice, a sense of threat, a desire to blame. As the Chancellor claims he wants to know what the disabled can do rather than what they can't (which I'll admit is a good line), with the other hand stricter sanctions on benefits are imposed this week. We should perhaps pray for any needing benefits because of disability, wondering how their voices will be heard.

Wondering what the healed man was called, we might ask God to provoke and challenge us this week when we are tempted to categorise the people we encounter, labelling according to a problem rather than a gift in order to keep them confined in our conscience.

This isn't meant to give you a burdensome list of people to worry about and pray for. Rather, it is to catch the tune and riff on John's jazzy Gospel, learn to improvise on it, and find confidence in our conversation with Jesus. It is meant to show just how quickly these treasured texts suggest so many possibilities in prayer; so much fascinating detail in relationship; so much possibility in our ordinary life, all of which is shot through with the grace of God,

who brings life where there was none,

clears sight when there is confusion,

creates opportunity out of ruin:

God who overwhelms human blame with her divine glory.