

Seeing & Reflecting - Sunday 7th January 2024

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We're going to think a little bit about where we're at in terms of the time of year and so on. To help us do that this morning, just want to start off with a Bible passage, which is from John's Gospel, chapter 9.

And it's a story of the way Jesus healed a particular fellow. So we'll have a look on the screens at this particular Bible story. As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus.

But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.

While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. After saying this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.

[1 : 26] High■■■! Five. Two. Two. Two. Three. Three.

Three. What do I? Last of them. Go, he told him. Wash in the pool of Sayloem. This word means sent.

So the man went and washed. And came home.

See you. So just a few thoughts on this. It's a cracking little story where Jesus heals the sight of a man born blind.

And generally in the gospel accounts, the stories of Jesus' life, we're told of a few times when Jesus heals blind people. But he seems to do it in slightly different ways each time.

[3 : 03] So for example, in another gospel, in Luke chapter 18, we're told about a blind man who's begging by the roadside just outside the city of Jericho. As Jesus approaches, the man shouts out for Jesus to heal him.

And he does. We're told this. It says, Jesus said to him, receive your sight. Your faith has healed you. And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God.

So it's a spectacular but relatively straightforward healing, it seems, for Jesus. Jesus simply says the word and it happens. This guy can see again.

Well, there's another story. This time set in the town of Bethsaida up north, where a blind man is brought by his friends to Jesus in the hope that he can be healed.

And we're told this time. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village.

When he'd spit on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, do you see anything?

[4 : 10] He looked up and said, I see people. They look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes.

Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. So in this instance, a little bit different, you know, instead of just saying the word, Jesus spits on the man's eyes.

And we don't know why, you know, presumably it was to help him wipe off perhaps some of the crust that might have formed around this blind man's eyelids.

I kind of imagine it like my mum used to do, sort of spit on her hanky when I was a little kid and sort of wipe my face and so on. I don't know if Jesus had a hanky on him, but you never know.

Something like that perhaps. This time though, the man is healed, we're told, in a couple of stages. First sort of blurred vision, this seeing people like trees walking. And then he sees everything clearly. You know, a metaphor perhaps for the way God opens our eyes in stages perhaps to the full extent of his love for us.

[5 : 18] But then to go back to the story that we saw at the beginning, we get this third healing of a blind man. This time not set in Jericho or Bethsaida, but in Jerusalem. And as we saw, it's a time

when Jesus makes mud out of spit and dirt.

And he puts it on the man's eyes. He then sends him to go and wash in a public pool in Jerusalem called the Pool of Siloam.

So why the difference here, do you think? Why the difference for this particular healing with the muddy man's eyes? I mean, we've seen Jesus heal others in more immediate ways or without asking him to go and wash mud off their eyes.

So why might Jesus ask this man in particular to go and wash at the pool in order to see? Well, in looking for clues why this one might be a bit different, it seems that the unique factor in the healing of this man in Jerusalem is that unlike the others that Jesus healed, this man, we're told, has been born blind.

It's not that his sight has faded over the years or he's suddenly lost it. No, he's never had it. And that means that his perception of himself and the world around him is going to be severely limited.

[6 : 43] He'll have no idea about colours, no idea about perspective or distances of light and dark. He'll have no idea of what trees or animals or even people really look like.

And that, I'd suggest, is significant because part of Jesus' compassion, part of his desire for anyone he heals, I would say part of his desire for each of us, is that we would be able to appreciate the world and our place in it more fully, that we would understand God and therefore understand ourselves in relation to God better.

Jesus opens people's eyes, whether literally or spiritually, to the wonder of God's love for them in the world. Now, how might that best play out for a man born blind, though?

Well, if we think about it, when Jesus sends this man to wash his eyes in the water, what's the first thing that this blind man is going to see?

In a video clip, for example, the producers, imagine this guy seeing someone else's face, this smiling lad here. Maybe that's his son, who no doubt helped to lead his dad down to the pool of Siloam.

[8 : 10] And that's a nice kind of bit of literary licence, I suppose. That's a nice thought to have, that this man might see his son's face as the first thing he's ever seen for the first time.

But I'm not so sure. More than that, perhaps prior to that, I wonder if the reason Jesus sends him to wash is because it means that the very first thing this man sees will be his own reflection, looking back at him in the water.

You know, this man will have no idea what a reflection even is. And so maybe Jesus wants the first thing this man sees reflected to be his own face, to be able to marvel who he is at the gift of life that God has given him.

You see, for someone born blind, maybe Jesus wants him to experience himself in the world first in a gentle, sort of staggered kind of way. That to me sounds the kind of kind, compassionate, bubble-sensitive way in which Jesus operates.

That this man, you know, that each of us, perhaps, need to know who we are and reflect on our own place in the world if we're to be able to fulfill Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

[9 : 39] Self-knowledge, self-reflection. It's not a selfish kind of navel-gazing exercise. Now, in fact, it's just the opposite because being self-aware, knowing ourselves, seeing ourselves as God sees us is crucial if we're to be able to truly empathize with others, if we're to truly love each other.

We know how to treat others by the way that we would want to be treated. And this idea, I think, of the importance of self-reflection, I think it's always been at the heart of what God desires for us.

So at the beginning of the creation story, for example, we're told this, that the spirit of God is described as hovering over the waters. There was picture language, of course, kind of like a spirit of God, a bird sort of fluttering over the surface.

But it does suggest, I think, because it's described as waters, it does suggest the way in which the creation which is about to be birthed will be a reflection of God's glory, you know, in all of its wonder and diversity and beauty.

And so just as creation is a reflection of God's goodness, so too that's our job, to reflect God's goodness in our lives, a goodness which grows the more we know God and the more he enables us to know ourselves.

[11 : 10] Says this, which hopefully ties it together, this verse here from Proverbs. As water reflects the face, so one's life reflects the heart.

Now, holding that in mind, it is, as we were saying, New Year time, time which naturally lends itself to reflection, you know, a chance to reflect on the year that's gone.

And as you do that, I don't know if you've done this in the past few days at New Year, if you were feeling happy or morose or whatever you were at New Year thinking that was 23, I don't know. I wonder as you look back to the last 12 months, to 2023, I wonder what immediate feelings or thoughts come to mind about the year we've just had.

As you think about the year that's gone, what kind of year would you say it's been? How would you sum it up? And I guess immediate thoughts, you might be thinking there's something major that's happened, could be big events, important stuff.

Could be health issues, could be births, deaths, could be celebrations, could be heartache, could be family stuff, could be relationships, could be holidays or home life, money stuff, could be work or school, you know, the stuff of life.

[12:26] That might dominate our thoughts about how the past year has played out. Now, maybe those things are the headlines for you, the things which characterize how positively or not you feel about 2023.

That's for us. Then again, if we think about our life together as a church, now we've done and experienced a lot together. So we've had plenty of good times, times of friendship and fellowship together.

we've had numerous new groups that have started and established groups, which continue to go well. We've installed a new kitchen, we've had a new website, we've employed a new caretaker. We've had big community events, both in the summer and then more recently in the winter. We've spent time on Sundays and online exploring various topics to do with our faith.

We've worshipped, we've prayed, we've sung, we've served, we've shared and we've celebrated, we've baptised and we've grieved.

[13:37] We've had people join us, we've had people leave, but overall, we've grown in number, which is encouraging. So each year, I have to do the stats, kind of like an annual return to the diocese to say how many people we are.

And just to let you know, because this is interesting, I think. So we've had 12% more adults on a Sunday on average, 25% more adults on a Monday at our service, Monday morning on average. And we've had 35% more children on a Sunday, year on year, than in 2022, which is really encouraging. And it's a credit to you and the love and the welcome which is on offer.

But then of course, while all that we do collectively and together is important and is designed in all sorts of ways to feed our faith and our sense of community, I know church life is just a fraction of our lives as individuals.

And so perhaps as we look deepest within, not about perhaps the stuff of life, not even perhaps about the communal stuff of life, I wonder what you might reflect on in terms of your character and your conduct over the last year.

[14:57] What have you learned about yourself in the last 12 months? How have you grown or you've been more generous with the way you are, the way you treat people? How have you become more gracious perhaps?

Equally, how might you have struggled? What kind of frustrations with not quite putting it into practice might you have had? Who have you opened up to? Who have you been honest with? Who have you shared with? Equally, who have you listened to? Who have you supported? And then perhaps most profoundly, how's your, how's our understanding of God changed in these past 12 months?

Has our faith grown? Has the way we pray, has that changed a bit? You know, how's our head, how's our heart doing with God? How might we have shared some of the good news of Jesus with those we live alongside, whether that's in the way we live practically or with what we might have said or prayed?

You know, lots to reflect on as we go a bit deeper in terms of our sort of inner being. And as we've seen from that story, as we've seen from God's ways in the world, I think reflection is an important, even vital part of what it means to be us.

[16:16] So, to help us do that this morning, because everyone reflects in different ways. We've tended to do this each year for a while now as a church, but you'll hopefully have found on your seat or if you've bunged it on the floor, a piece of paper and an envelope and a pen on your chair.

So, I'd like you to get hold of those, but when you've got your piece of card and your pen, what I'd like us to do, please, on one side of the card is to write 2023 on the top of it, the year, 2023. And then, just for a few minutes in the quiet, this is a solo act and no one's going to see what you write unless you're taking a sneaky peek over your neighbour's shoulder or whatever. What I'd like us to do, if you'd like to, is to jot down on that 2023 side reflections, your reflections of the last year. Could be big stuff, could be things in the news which you can't shake in terms of dominated your thoughts, could be community stuff, could be church stuff, could be family, friendship stuff, but also, if you can, put down some personal stuff as well.

You know, reflections on your feelings, your character, your conduct, above all, if you can, reflections on your relationship, our relationships with each other and with God.

[17 : 38] As I said, no one's going to see this, so you can be as personal as you wish and then I'll tell you what we're going to do with the other side in a bit, but we'll put a little bit of music on to not make it too awkward and silent.

But if you want to spend a few minutes doing that, think through the past year with yourself, with God, and jot down the sort of main things that you want to reflect on as being part of your story over the past 12 months.

I know some may have written two or three words, some will be writing half a novel with their jottings. That's okay, that's okay. You can always continue to fill things in later if you've got more that you want to jot down.

But I guess the flip side and the fruit perhaps of reflection is to use that knowledge of where we've been as a pit stop or as a foundation even for the journey ahead.

And so with 2023 behind us, looking forward into this year, 2024, I wonder for you as you look ahead what might be your hopes for the coming year?

[18 : 49] What might your prayers be? What are you excited about the next 12 months to come? What are you optimistic about? But equally, what are you fearful about?

What are you apprehensive for? What might you say you need more of in the coming year? What might you think, actually, I need to let go of that. I need to put that down.

You know, maybe you might want to consider for the year ahead what clarity or guidance you'd like to receive from God. Equally, what bits of your character, your conduct, do you perhaps want to ask God to help you to be formed, to be more like Jesus in?

Who or what would you like to make more of a priority of over these coming 12 months? And so, the obvious thing, you want to flip the paper over onto the other blank side and you want to write 2024 on the top of that side, please.

And then when you're ready, do you want to jot down a few thoughts about the year that is to come? Your hopes, your concerns, your aspirations, perhaps, your prayers on that side.

[20 : 04] And we'll put the music on and then we'll conclude that in a few minutes. And then what the final bit I'd like us to do, you see there's an envelope there.

Do you want to fold up your bit of paper, pop that in the envelope and then write your name on the front of the envelope and then if you can seal it up, please.

Some relief from some quarters. If you seal it up, put your name on the front, seal it up, pop in your pocket, pop in your bag, take it home and then hide it for a year. Okay?

Hide it for a year. Stick it in a drawer, stick it in a cupboard, don't look at it for a year and then next January, get it out again and see where you are at today and how the year has gone as we begin 2025 as a kind of, okay God, that's where I was, this is where I am now, let me think where you've been with me over the course of 2024.

Now I don't know if we've been doing that if you found that an easy task or a pleasant exercise, maybe it's encouraging to look back, maybe it's invigorating for you to look forward to, if so, great.

[21 : 24] And again, maybe it's a bit depressing to look back because 2023 was tough and maybe 2024 feels like a pretty uphill battle to begin with already.

I think in all of this though, the good news is that if we return to Jesus' healing of this man born blind, is that Jesus, by enabling us to reflect on ourselves and our lives and our relationship with God, Jesus longs for us to know both his healing and his hope in our lives.

We might not feel we've been born blind, so to speak, but Jesus has always got ways to get the crust off our eyes, to lick his hanky and wipe our eyes clearer so we can see more of his love for us and for our world, recognising perhaps the world for the beautiful creation that it has, is and always

will be, that it remains full of wonder for recognising the inherent worth in each other, for seeing why and how Jesus always loves the world, but equally as God continues to sort of open our eyes to the realities of the world around us, he'll be getting our attention on the things that are problematic, you know, seeing the world in its flawed state, problems which are profound, but problems that only God through Jesus and Jesus working through us will be able to redeem and make good, and I guess in all of this, perhaps my prayer is we leave 23 behind and go into 24, as we look back and as we look forward, as we reflect and as we respond to what's to come, it's that 2024 might be a year for us to grow together as a church so that our lives might ever more reflect the love of Jesus in all we're about,

I'm not sure we need a mission statement, we just need to be more like Jesus, that's what it's all about by my understanding.