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Followers must see clearly – Mark 8:22-37

Sometimes we need help to see what following Jesus means. To help his disciples Jesus healed a blind man but this is the only time Jesus healed someone in stages. It is a two-stage cure. At first the man can see better but his vision is very blurry. Only when Jesus touches him a second time can he see clearly. There is nothing else like it in the gospels.

Jesus never did "random" miracles. So what's going on here? Jesus and his disciples came to Bethsaida, some friends of a blind man find out Jesus has arrived so they brought him to Jesus and begged him to touch him.

Jesus was both caring and sensitive to people in their need. He communicates to the blind man through touch, taking him by the hand. He respects his privacy by leading him away from curious eyes. What did they say to each other as they walked? I wish we knew.

Then Jesus spat on His eyes..." Aren't you glad that we don't have to mimic this method today? Spittle was thought to have medicinal properties... Though he couldn't see anything he could feel everything!

Jesus asked "Do you see anything?" "And He looked up and said, 'I see people, but they look like trees, walking.'" There is a change but full sight is tantalisingly out of reach. There is contrast, light and shade, but it is blurred and indistinct, so it is more frustrating than fulfilling.

"Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again..." "And he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly- beginning with Jesus."

So why did he heal in stages? Jesus didn't run out of power. He wasn't limited by the person's lack of faith. Was it to show that Jesus ministers differently with different people? Was it to let us know that Jesus longs to touch us more than once? I think he used the opportunity for a teachable moment for his followers who saw without seeing.

Earlier in the chapter in the feeding of the 4000 they had clearly failed to learn from the earlier feeding of the 5,000, that what Jesus did once he could do again, whether facing a Jewish or a Gentile audience. Had they forgotten, had faith failed, or was it, to their shame, prejudice that blocked their eyes from seeing what Jesus could do? Then having forgotten to take the surplus bread on board, they worried about their next meal even though Jesus, the bread provider, was with them.

Exasperated Jesus says "How can you be so blind after having been with me so long? Every parent has said something similar. "Do you have eyes but fail to see?" Like the blind man they needed a second touch. For the clock was ticking and having begun to follow him, they needed to be clear who they were following and where they were going.

They come to Caesarea Philippi, to the foot of Mount Hermon. Out of the cliff face flows the Jordan. Over the years it proved a natural setting for worship. Called Banias by the Canaanites, it was renamed Panias by the Greeks, who said their god Pan, half man half goat, had a cave there. Now a white marble Temple had been built to honour the Emperor, Philip's Caesar, worshipped as a god. Here in this place where there were gods in the form of men; and men in the form of gods; where the boundary between the human and divine was flimsy and blurred, Jesus, the God-man, asks the question "Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples edited their answers and did not suggest bad, mad or possessed! "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others still one of the prophets." Flattering words about anyone else, but not enough here. So the question become more pointed "Who do you say that I am?" What did they think about in the moment's silence before Peter responded?

Who indeed was this man? –
who taught with authority and not as the scribes
who never lost an argument –
who had no fault in his character -
who had an uncanny insight into people and situations–
who never lost control of a situation –
who displayed complete self-confidence and authority –
who knew God better than anyone else.

At last Peter saw clearly. It all fell into place. The scales fell off from his eyes. He spoke words that changed their lives forever: "You are the Christ" - the promised one of God. The whole gospel hinges on those four words.

Now they saw who he was, he could tell them what kind of Christ he had come to be. So he began to speak of the Cross and Resurrection. Could they see what the future would mean for him, even if they resisted the idea? Did they realise what it would mean for them? If anyone would come after me they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”

The path of discipleship would involve death to self and surrender to Jesus Christ. This is the hinge of the gospel. From now on his focus moves increasingly from the crowd to the disciples. He sets his face towards Jerusalem where the showdown must take place.

The shadows will begin to lengthen, as his destiny becomes increasingly clear, for those who see. So insight into who Christ is leads to understanding of what it will mean to be his disciple. There is no beating about the bush, no soft-peddling the nature of commitment.

Do they now see? Not yet, not fully. The miracle is a parable of the disciples' spiritual confusion. It is possible to have eyes and yet not see very clearly. Cloudy spiritual vision afflicts every Christian to some degree. Eugene Peterson catches the meaning with this paraphrase in the Message of part of 1 Corinthians 13: "We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist" That applies to all of us. Squinting through a fog. Peering through a mist. Only as Jesus keeps on opening your eyes to Him and to your calling will you see clearly. They did have some spiritual vision but it needed to be focussed and sharpened.

Suppose however this is not just a word to us personally but to our Church today. Do we not desperately need a second touch to see Christ more clearly today? Whatever we face, in all the challenges of secularisation God has not changed. Christ is the same as he has ever been. The gospel has not lost its ancient power to transform people and situations.

Do we not need a second touch so that as a Church we will be willing if called, to show whose we are and whom we serve and present an authentic discipleship to a weary and cynical world.

Let me finish with this. What finally made the difference for this poor man was his honesty. He didn't lie to Jesus. He could have said after the first touch, "Lord, I see all things clearly." If he had said that, it might have stopped there with 20:20 vision tantalisingly out of reach. His honesty gave him the sight he did not have. How difficult it is to admit our weakness, to be honest about our need of Christ. Is your vision blurry? Come to him. Do you see others as trees walking? Come to him. How wonderful when your vision is fully restored. But this is what God wants for all of us. When we admit our need, then we become excellent

candidates for some divine eye surgery. He came that we who are followers might see clearly. Do you believe that?