

*seeing*  
a sermon preached on the  
*fourth sunday in lent*  
29 March 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Evolution is a wild and foolish and reckless experiment. In the words of the writer Annie Dillard: “The universe has continued to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and colossi down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies with ever fresh vigour”.<sup>1</sup> The long, slow climb out of the primeval soup involves a vast trail of extinctions and dead ends in evolutionary development. Indeed, the number of dead ends far exceeds the number of growing shoots. The results of evolution cannot be seen in advance.

Spiritual development – its highest expression being human consciousness – is *part* of evolution, not something separate from it. Our spiritual development is an aspect of evolution itself. Each new evolutionary leap in spiritual consciousness, a leap into the unknown. And there is something profligate, extravagant, even wasteful about this great enterprise also. No one can say in advance, for sure, which line of spiritual development is the ‘leading edge’ – and which will be the dead end. We do not have the necessary sight. And because no one can say for sure, then, like Jesse presenting all his sons one by one before Samuel the prophet,<sup>2</sup> all lines of possible development must be tested. Human history and religious history repeatedly demonstrate this fact.

We tend to regard Jesus’ disputants in the gospel stories – Pharisees and other religious leaders – in strictly moral terms. But there is another criterion, a non-moral one – the criteria of spiritual inertia. As those responsible for passing on the traditions, spiritual inertia is in fact necessary.

But in today’s gospel Jesus exposes the dark aspect of spiritual inertia; and demonstrates the trajectory of spiritual evolution.

Firstly the disciples. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”<sup>3</sup> Respect for the causative moral principle upon which human civilisation has depended is not the action of a perverse man or woman. Rather, the disciples simply give voice to the normative assumption for making sense of human life, simple moral causation.

So Jesus shows them the leading edge of spiritual evolution: causation is not the *only* operative principle in the universe by which to describe the connection between two phenomena – “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him”.<sup>4</sup> The one event, sin, did not cause the other, blindness. The two events *are* connected, yes; but *in a non-causal way*. 2000 years later, we now know this from quantum physics; Newtonian mechanics cannot explain all of reality, indeed it cannot explain anything of quantum reality.

Next, with the Pharisees. By healing the blind beggar, Jesus exposes the Pharisees as a dead end, a ‘terminal phylum’. “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath”.<sup>5</sup> Respect for the holiness of the Sabbath is not the action of a perverse man. Rather, it is the action of a holy man who respects the line of spiritual development upon which he stands. However, the problem for the holy man and woman, is that he or she cannot know in advance whether a spiritual development might be the leading edge – or a terminal phylum, a dead end, the path to annihilation and death. It is their refusal to be open to the light<sup>6</sup> of spiritual evolution which condemns the Pharisees as terminal phylum.

So both disciples and Pharisees are being shown the spiritual trajectory. This attraction of God’s future unknown alarms them. They fail to see.

Yet there is someone who does see! An outcast, an unclean man, one of the uneducated and marginalised who was physically blind *can* see; and becomes a disciple, of the spiritual evolution in Christ. “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where [the man who gave me sight] comes from, and yet he opened my eyes!”<sup>7</sup> In this encounter, as elsewhere in the gospels, the terminal phylum and the leading edge of spiritual development turn out to be topsy-turvy: “I came into this world for judgement so that those who

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1 Annie Dillard, from “Pilgrim at Tinker Creek”, in *The Annie Dillard Reader*, New York: Harper Collins, 1994, pp287-8.

2 1 Samuel 16:6-12

3 John 9:2

4 John 9:3

5 John 9:16

6 John 8:12

7 John 9:30

do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind”.<sup>8</sup> “Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light”.<sup>9</sup>

Spiritual development, like evolution, is always about *seeing*; a matter of things becoming *visible*, about seeing the light,<sup>10</sup> the light that enlightens everyone.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, spiritual development is a being pulled forward by the Holy Spirit, in directions we ourselves could not have devised – and for which we can never claim the credit. Jesus himself is very careful to declare that the development in human spirituality taking expression in him is not of his own making – and refuses to take any credit – he only declares what the Father has declared to him.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus also indicates that this is the way for *all* human ones. Every person is pulled forward by the Holy Spirit into the unknown – along a line of development the outcome of which remains unknown. Like the disciples and the Pharisees we find that we are being led beyond the spiritual principles and structures upon which we have come to depend – and upon which our life thus far has been constructed.

In Lent we hear, once again, the call of this future, the wild and reckless and life-giving call of spiritual development. What we had assumed to be the direction of spiritual development is a terminal phylum; we accept that it played its part in our development, is now a dead end.

This task has always been the greatest and the most difficult of all human tasks – we could even say that it is *the* human task – so we should not be too hard on ourselves if we are struggling with its immensity. Insofar as an act of will and choice are relevant, it is the conscious choice to accept that call into the unknown which is set before us. Sin is our refusal to accept the spiritual development into which we are being called.

Together, and by the grace of communion in Christ, the new creation is coming to birth in and through us – if we can accept the call of the Spirit.

One last detail from John’s text is worth pondering: “Jesus spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud on the man’s eyes”.<sup>13</sup> English Bible translations mask from us something of profound significance here. In Genesis 2 the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground.<sup>14</sup> We think he’s given a proper name, Adam; but in fact the Hebrew simply says that God creates a creature from earth, the land, the ground, the dust. So this episode in John’s gospel story is a creation story; the creation of a new human person, a new creature of the dust, the earth, the ground. Miraculously and mysteriously, spiritual development is always founded upon what preceded it – the ground itself. The dust from the ground of our old and decaying structures, forms the miraculous paste<sup>15</sup> which brings sight to our spiritual blindness.

[vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au](mailto:vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au)

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<sup>8</sup> John 9:39  
<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 5:13-14  
<sup>10</sup> John 9:5  
<sup>11</sup> John 1:9  
<sup>12</sup> John 12:49  
<sup>13</sup> John 9:6  
<sup>14</sup> Genesis 2:7  
<sup>15</sup> John 9:6