

The Power of His Presence

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie St, Sydney on Sunday 3 April 2011, by David Gill. Readings for the 4th Sunday in Lent were 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Ephesians 5:8-14, St John 9:1-11.

Back in the days when we read daily newspapers instead of computer screens, we could look forward to a daily diet of comic strips. My favourite was "Peanuts". Remember "Peanuts"? It featured Charlie Brown, who was one of life's victims; Lucy, one of life's irritants; and their dog Snoopy, one of life's wise commentators.

In one strip, Snoopy's doghouse had burned to the ground. A great tragedy. He'd lost his record collection, his pool table, even his Van Gogh painting. We see Snoopy sitting there, surveying the ruins, when Lucy turns up and decides to give him a burst of religion. "You know why your doghouse burned?" she says. "Because you *sinned*, that's why". Snoopy responds by sticking out his tongue and saying "Blah!". In the last frame we see him thinking to himself "Her kind deserves to be blah-ed".

I'm with Snoopy on that one. Shonky religion does deserve to be rubbished. And there is an awful lot of that kind of religion around right now.

Disaster strikes and within hours someone, somewhere, is sure to say God is punishing the victims for whatever shortcomings, real or imagined, the speaker happens to be worried about.

Take Japan. In the midst of last month's tragedy, the governor of Tokyo said, unwisely, that it was "divine punishment" for people's greed. Pakistan's 2002 earthquake had Osama bin Laden claiming that Allah was punishing the country for – yes, you guessed it – Pakistan's support of the US-led war on terror. The terrible tsunami on Boxing day 2004 was, according to a former chief rabbi, God's retribution on those who wanted Israel to withdraw its troops from Gaza.

Then there was Christchurch. Within hours of that tragedy, a presumably Christian Utah-based website announced that God was giving New Zealanders their comeuppance because of – you'll love this one -- "lesbians running loose on the south island as if they own the place".

Snoopy would have known what to do with that!

We hear such statements and we cringe. We cringe because life is not that simple. Because the God we've glimpsed in Jesus is not that cruel. Because it's wrong to exploit anyone's suffering like that.

We cringe. Of course, we have to admit that similar logic is found in parts of the Bible. The insurance industry has scriptural precedent when it labels inexplicable tragedies "acts of God". But there are other parts of the Bible where such thinking is rejected as simplistic. In the deep heartsearching of the book of Job, for example. In the personal anguish expressed in many of the Psalms.

And in today's gospel.

The man had been born blind. "Who sinned," the disciples want to know; "this man or his parents?" Neither, says Jesus, declining to play the blame game. They press him: then why the blindness? Jesus' reply stops us in our tracks. "He was born blind so that God's works may be revealed in him".

Now that response really jars. God making someone blind, to provide scope for a bit of divine self-promotion? God inflicting suffering, just to show what he can do? Something's wrong there. It doesn't sound like the God Jesus was on about, the God he embodied. Not at all.

What's happening, I think, is that we're being treated to a bit of editorial spin. Each of the four gospels attempts to tell the story of Jesus in a way that makes clear his significance. But each also echoes the situation in which those early Christians found themselves: their questions, dilemmas, struggles, hopes, fears.

By the time this fourth gospel gets written, about a century after Jesus' birth, the Jewish community is more self-consciously dividing into those who have become followers of Jesus and those who haven't. Each group is defining itself over against the other, and the effort at self-definition is reflected in its writings.

That's why parts of John's gospel seem particularly hostile to "the Jews" – a hostility that taken in context is understandable, but taken out of that context through the centuries has fed the monster of "Christian" Europe's appalling anti-semitism.

That same exercise in Christian self-definition is why John's gospel spins the encounter between Jesus and the man born blind. Here it's not just one more miracle story. Here it carries a weight of symbolism far beyond the story. The man born blind is every man, every woman, and the light glimpsed is the Light of the world. What we're hearing is an emphasis, with the volume turned up loud, that this is *God's work, God's light bearer, God's sight-giver*. This is a moment of *divine revelation*. So, everyone, for God's sake – literally – take it seriously.

If we'd had longer this morning we might have heard more of the controversy that swirled around Jesus' encounter with the man born blind. It goes on for the whole of chapter 9, involving the man's neighbours, his parents, the disciples, some Pharisees, the community in general. Just occasionally the erstwhile blind man finds himself dragged in, almost in passing, as each side tries to prove a point.

I can't help wondering how the chapter might have read if, instead of being used as ammunition by the contending parties, that man had been allowed more scope to speak for himself. What might he have said?

Perhaps he would have said something like this.

Look, you guys can talk religion until you're blue in the face. I don't know much about your theology. I'm not interested in this game of pinning "sin" labels on people. I can't pretend to understand why life is the way it is. Or why I was born the way I was.

But some things I do know.

I do know kindness when I meet it. I do know compassion when it brushes my face. I do know love when it touches my poor scarred eyes. I do know a new beginning when it stops me in my tracks. I do know light when it begins to shine through my darkness.

I do know that, in the caring of this strange man from Nazareth, in the power of his presence, I have met my God.

*