

**FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, March 22, 2020**  
**“From Object to Subject ” (John 9)**

I was proud of myself. I had looked ahead through the entire season of Lent, and made decisions about the focus for each service. Not that it was a real challenge: in this year in the lectionary cycle, all the gospel passages revolve around Jesus' encounters with a variety of people as told in the gospel of John. For someone like me who loves stories, this is like offering catnip to a feline.

For this the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Refreshment Sunday, when we take a break from the serious, sombre, reflective atmosphere of this church season, the story on offer is Jesus' meeting with a man born blind. I find it fascinating the way this individual is treated as an object rather than a subject. First, by Jesus' disciples who ask: “who sinned - this man or his parents - that he was born blind?” For them, this person presents a theological problem: “why is there suffering in this world Gods loves? Why do bad things happen if God is in charge?” Their question is not open-ended. Clearly, it must be a matter of God punishing sin. The only thing to ponder is: whose?

Like the disciples, we too may be craving answers. How did this COVID-19 pandemic begin? How did we miss the first signs of this corona virus, what went wrong our response that it has spread around the world? Why have individuals contracted this disease? Is it a result of their bad decisions or their failure to keep social distance or self-isolate? Such questions can give us the illusion of distance from patients on ventilators, and families mourning

unexpected losses, the illusion that COVID-19 isn't everyone's problem in this inter-connected world of ours.

Second, the crowd view the man born blind as an object. For years they have been coming across him begging in the street. He is the recipient of their charity. But have they every really seen him? Now, that his eyes have been opened, they are not even sure it is the same person.

Are there people we really do not see? People who are just part of the scenery like wait staff in a restaurant or checkout clerks in supermarkets and pharmacies or PSW's in long term care facilities or.... Might this pandemic with its changes to the way we go about our daily lives be a wake up call to open our eyes, and see - really see - one another?

Third, the religious leaders treat this man as an object. No one asks him how he feels about his experience - what it is like for him to suddenly, unexpectedly enter a visual world; how he is coping with all the faces peering at him and the flood of colours. No. What they are interested in is uncovering how it happened. What kind of person would bring about such a healing on the Sabbath, the one day when any form of work is forbidden? They are ready to critique and condemn the one who acted: he is a sinner; he should have waited until the Sabbath was over.

As we journey through this crisis, we may be tempted to join these religious leaders on the sidelines and find fault with the decisions of politicians and health authorities, with the actions of state and church - they should have acted sooner; been better prepared; taken stronger measures... Certainly the

global response has not been perfect, but let's face it: the religious leaders did not bring healing to the blind beggar; confining ourselves to critiquing and condemning does not bring us any closer to an end to the COVID-19 crisis.

The man born blind may be treated as an object by the disciples, the crowd and the religious leaders, but as the story unfolds, he comes more and more into his own. This person who has been dependent on his parents and on handouts from the charitable stands up for himself, refusing to backdown in the face of those who hold power and authority in his community. His healing has cut him off from the past: his parents have distanced themselves; he can no longer support himself by begging. He has no idea what the future will hold for him or if there will even be a future. But as the story closes, he is not alone. Jesus is standing right there beside him.

With COVID-19, we have all been cut off from our usual way of life whether that was commuting to our job site or going to school or taking part on exercise programmes, classes and activities. We cannot go out to restaurants, theatres, cinemas; visit the library, recreation centre, museum, art gallery, zoo; attend worship services; have face-to-face gatherings with friends and extended family. What makes it so much harder, we don't know how long this will last - weeks? months? - and whether life will ever look exactly the way it did before. But we have the assurance that we are not alone even on this journey we didn't foresee and would never have chosen. No more than Abraham and Sarah when they leave their home and friends to set out for a land God would show them. No more than Joseph when he is languishing in Pharaoh's prison cell, uncertain

whether one day, he would be released or executed. No more than the Hebrew people as they wander in the wilderness, wondering where their next meal would come from (unlike us who clean out grocery store shelves, they cannot hoard manna because it goes bad). No more than Mary when she says “yes” to God’s messenger - she, a young unmarried woman, will bear God’s own Child. No more than the fishers when they leave their nets to follow Jesus.

We are not alone on this journey whose duration and end we do not know. Therefore, we do not need to be afraid. When I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education at Toronto Western Hospital, the song I sang to myself as I answered the call for a chaplain in Emergency or ICU was “Be not Afraid”. The chorus goes like this: “Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest.” May we hold fast to this promise and assurance.