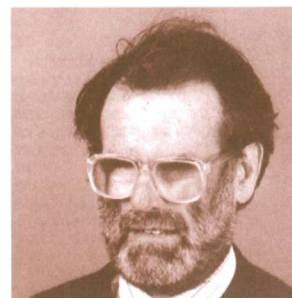


HOW I DISCOVERED MY BLIND BROTHER

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WHEN I WAS A THEOLOGICAL STUDENT IN THE EARLY 1960s, I WAS REQUIRED TO WRITE AN ESSAY ON "DARKNESS AND LIGHT IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL". These concepts form part of the well-known symbolic dualism of John's Gospel: light is associated with truth, faith and Jesus Christ; darkness goes along with unbelief, disobedience, sin and blindness. The healing of the man born blind, I learned, occupies a central place in the thought of the Gospel. It was all very beautiful and meaningful. As far as I remember, my essay received a fairly good grade. Although I was already completely blind in one eye, it did not occur to me that this was significant for an interpretation of the text, and it did not influence my reading of the Fourth Gospel in any way.

Some twenty years later, I again found myself reading the Fourth Gospel, not with my eyes but with my fingers. I had lost the sight of my second eye and had become a registered blind person. The first book I bought in Braille was this very Gospel, and although my reading of Braille was very slow, I gained enormous pleasure from having immediate access to the words I knew so well. However, as I read on I became less comfortable. The opening words about the light shining in the darkness and the darkness not understanding it had made but little impression on me; I suppose they were so familiar to me and I was so preoccupied with the pleasure and the complexity of accessing the text. By the time I came to chapter eight, I was conscious of a distinct sense of unease. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (v. 12). What could these words mean for me, for I walk in darkness every day? Of course, this was only symbolic, or should I say at least symbolic? The deeper meaning was that faith in Jesus Christ gives meaning and purpose to one's life. Nevertheless, I had been brought up in a Christian tradition that had trained me to look upon God's Word as a mirror of my life, to see myself there and to find a personal meaning in the words. The reflection of my life which came back to me now was that the symbols did not represent my experience. I seemed to be on the wrong side of the symbolic divide.

With chapter nine I became deeply puzzled. Clearly, whoever wrote this chapter was not blind. Certainly, Jesus rejects the possibility that the man's blindness was caused by his sin or some sin of his parents. So far, so good. But what did Jesus mean when he said "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (v. 3). Obviously, the work of God was not

thought of as being displayed in the blindness but in the gift of sight. He was sighted when he displayed the works of God. The following words also struck me as representing a sighted person's point of view. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work" (v. 4). But there are workers for whom the night makes no difference. What about the blind weavers, the expert unsighted potters, and even, maybe, the tactile carpenters? Was I responding too literally to a symbolic text? What Jesus meant, I suppose, was that we must get on with the calling of God at every opportunity because ultimately that opportunity will no longer be there.

When questioned, the man replies: "One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see" (v. 25). What memories this expression evoked in me! How many hymns refer to this thought?

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind:
Sight, riches, healing of the mind –
Yea, all I need in thee to find;
O Lamb of God, I come.

But could I come to Jesus just as I was? After all, I reflected, there were no blind people among the disciples of Jesus. Would it be flippant to remark that this would be impossible since the moment a blind person offered to follow Jesus, his or her sight would have been restored? No, not flippant at all, since in all four Gospels, the restoration of sight represents conversion. When blind Bartimaeus heard the call of Jesus and had his sight restored, he followed Jesus in the way, and not before then (Mk 10.46ff.). Certainly, Saul was blinded when he was thrown from his horse but when he received confirmation of his call his sight was restored (Acts 9.1–19). No apostle of Christ could be blind. It would disprove the message. But why should this be so? Did the crucifixion of Jesus disprove his Messiahship? Then why should the continued blindness of Paul be inconsistent with his apostleship? Indeed, Paul speaks of carrying the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels and refers to a thorn in the flesh, so why not blindness?

As I studied these passages, it became clear to me that there is a difference between the language attributed to

Jesus Christ ... leads me, not as a sighted saviour but as a blind brother. He has gone on ahead and is familiar with the route. I lightly touch his elbow as I follow him. So far we have not fallen into ditches.

OTHER WRITINGS BY JOHN HULL ON A THEOLOGY OF BLINDNESS AND DISABILITY INCLUDE:
On Sight and Insight: a Journey into the World of Blindness (Oxford: One World, 1997; reprinted 2001)

In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible (London: SCM Press, 2001)

"The Material Spirituality of Blindness and Money", in Ruth Harvey (ed.), *Wrestling and Resting: Exploring Stories of Spirit from Britain and Ireland* (London: CTBI, 1999), pp. 69–72

"Blindness and the Face of God: Toward a Theology of Disability", in Hans-Georg Ziebertz et al (eds.), *The Human Image of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 215–29

"Open Letter from a Blind Disciple to a Sighted Saviour", in Martin O'Kane (ed.), *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 154–77

"Sight to the Inly Blind? Attitudes to Blindness in the Hymnbooks", *Theology CV*, No. 827 (Sept–Oct 2002), pp. 333–41

"A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as Both Problem and Potential", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 16/2 (2003), pp. 21–35

"The Broken Body in a Broken World", *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* VI/4 (Spring 2004)

► Jesus and that of Paul. For Paul, not to see is symbolic of the life of faith, for "we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5.7), and was aware that we all "see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13.12), with partial sight and the Letter to the Hebrews is in the same vein when it begins by recognising that faith is the evidence of things not seen (Heb 11.1). By way of contrast, Jesus is reported to have used the word "blind" as a reproach if not actual abuse (Mt 23.14–26). When, in my study of the Bible under these new conditions, from this strange new world into which I had been reborn, I became not only puzzled but distressed. Why, I pondered, could you not have said "stupid Pharisees", or "stubborn fools"? Why must it be "blind guides", and "blind fools"? Why use my condition as a term of abuse in this way? I became more worried when I considered the illustrations which Jesus is said to have used in this speech: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt 23.24), "you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup ..." (v. 25). It is true, dear Lord. How many times have I swallowed a gnat! I always eat an apple with caution, wondering if there will be a worm! You are right again, Lord, for the only way I can tell if the inside of a coffee mug is clean is by feeling it! But then I would have to wash it again.

As I discussed this passage with my friends, I often encountered what I came to call "the metaphorical defence". Of course, Jesus was not referring to people who were literally blind, no, but surely the metaphor gains its point from the fact that it is based upon quite accurate perception of how blind people do behave, and represents a general image of blind people as being incapable of discrimination. Others, in replying, ventured historical scepticism; he probably did not say those words. Maybe not. But it is reported, and is part of the Gospel record. Am I to regard it as the Word of God to my life?

It was becoming clearer that although the sayings were expressed in metaphor, they were metaphors which came from the world of sighted people, and were directed against people like me. Such metaphorical use continues to this day. I hear my medical colleagues speak about a blind trial, and on examination boards I hear talk of blind marking. They mean anonymous marking, or trials, when the patients do not know whether they have received the medicine or only a placebo, but every time such metaphorical reinforcement of blindness as ignorance is used, there is

a collaboration with the prejudice against blind people. This is evidenced in the vigour of everyday speech as well as in the press and media, and the persistence of this negativity owes a great deal to the language of the Bible; indeed, it appears to have been authorised by Jesus himself.

A good deal of the negative imagery in the Bible is concerned with the mobility of blind people. I suppose that there must have been many blind people in ancient Palestine and many of these would have been working inside their homes or sitting in the marketplace. Whether knitting, modelling in wood or stone, or making baskets and pottery, they would not have been particularly noticeable. As soon as a blind craftsman got up to walk around, the problem of mobility would have become obvious. So we read in Deuteronomy 28.29: "you shall grope around at noon as blind people grope in darkness; but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed without anyone to help" (cf. Is 59.10; Lam 4.14).

What a picture these verses present of the lives of blind people in the ancient world! Oppressed and robbed, helpless and pitiable! It is true that blind people do need to make contact with the fabric around them. I trail my white cane along the curb to prevent me from accidentally walking into the road. My cane lightly touches the front fences of the houses as I walk along the street. This is not groping but a perfectly rational response within my world.

Can the blind lead the blind? (Mt 15.14) This is possible if one of them is familiar with the route. The one who knows goes first being guided by the dog or the cane, and the one who has not been there before lightly touches the elbow of his or her friend. They are safe because blind people are careful.

The truth was now plain. The Bible was written by sighted people. This is so obvious, and yet its implications had never occurred to me. Jesus was a sighted person speaking to a sighted culture where there were no resources, no technology and little employment for blind people. Jesus as a sighted prophet often attacks the vanities of the sighted world but at the same time he shares many of the prevailing attitudes. But where does that leave the blind Christian today?

The turning point in my own exploration came when I meditated upon the saying of Jesus in response to the question of John the Baptist (Lk 7.22f.). Jesus said, "the

blind receive their sight ... And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me". No doubt John in prison would have taken offence if Jesus had not restored their sight, and perhaps there are blind Christians like myself who have become conscious of the negative implications of such miracle stories. However, no matter on which side of the abyss dividing blind and sighted people you may be, the saying retains its force: blessed is the one who takes no offence. But, I wondered, how can I not take offence? You misunderstand my lifestyle, you use my state as a term of reproach and you think I have nothing to offer at feasts and parties!

My attention was then drawn to another passage: the incident (Mk 14.65) when Jesus was blindfolded. We do not know whether this lasted for a few moments or for a longer period, but I found myself wondering what this meant to him. Of course, being blindfolded is not the same as being blind, but it is a kind of approximation. It shows willing. In Matthew 8.17 we are told that Jesus carried our infirmities and bore our sicknesses, but to restore the sight of others is not to carry the blindness yourself. Now, however, he shoulders my blindness. He enters my world. Perhaps in his dying moments when the eclipse had darkened the earth, he thought that he was again blindfolded or had gone blind. Was this why he thought that God had forsaken him? Was it the God of light who had left him to die alone in the darkness?

Since I discovered the blind or the blindfolded Christ my attitudes have changed. I cannot claim that parts of the Bible are not alienating but I have discovered a companion, a blind brother. From that time my relationship with Jesus Christ has been moulded by this imagery. He leads me, not as a sighted saviour but as a blind brother. He has gone on ahead and is familiar with the route. I lightly touch his elbow as I follow him. So far we have not fallen into ditches. ■