



## Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

**Minister: Rev Dr André J Groenewald**

8 Manse Court, East Calder, Livingston, EH53 0HF

Tel: 01506 884585, Mob: 075 888 458 14, email: groenstes@yahoo.com

[www.knec4jesus.org.uk](http://www.knec4jesus.org.uk)



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**Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald**

**Reading: John 9.35-41**

### **Background to the reading**

On the Sabbath day Jesus walked from the temple and saw a blind man. Usually blind people were excluded from the temple and would sit outside and beg. It was a very good place to beg because people would feel charitable as they left the temple. Blindness was one of the blemishes disqualifying descendants of Aaron from performing sacrifice to God. Likewise, it was forbidden to offer blind animals in sacrifice. The blind were to be protected in accordance with God's covenantal instructions: no stumbling block was to be placed in their way; and anyone who misled a blind person was cursed. Then the disciples also spotted him and asked the big question of their day: Is the man blind because of his sins or his parent's sins? Jewish teachers believed that suffering, including blindness was often due to sin; one could suffer for one's parents' sins or even for a sin committed by mother or fetus during the pregnancy. But then Jesus responded by saying none of the above. Since night is coming and it is still day He must do the work He was sent to do because no one (except night watchmen and shepherds) works in the dark. He is the light of the world.

Spittle was sometimes used for healing in pagan circles, so it would naturally represent an agent of healing in popular thought. But spittle was still more widely considered vulgar and gross, and its application would make the man uncomfortable if he knew what it was. Jesus then sends this man to the "Pool of Siloam".

It is not clear whether "Siloam" meant "sent," but Greek teachers as well as Jewish teachers from Philo to the Jewish teachers commonly made arguments based on wordplays. Siloam was the name of the pool and tower near the temple in Jerusalem. It was also known as the Pool of Shiloah by the king's garden according to Nehemiah 3 and Isaiah. According to the ancient historian Josephus, Siloam was a pool at the mouth of the Tyropoeon valley, about sixty yards west of the southern point of Ophel at Jerusalem. It is probable that this was the pool dug by King Hezekiah. It was to the Pool of Siloam that a Levite was sent with a golden pitcher on "the last day, that great day of the feast" of tabernacles. Siloam was also used as a water supply and for baptizing converts to Judaism. To this pool the blind man was sent to wash and returned seeing. The tower of Siloam was nearby.

Why did Jesus send him there? It was probably the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles and the water of Siloam was the sacred water used for this feast. Jesus employs the ritual water but it works only because the man is “sent.”

His neighbors could not believe that the blind man was healed because it was common knowledge in those days that those blind from birth were not known to recover — at least not without direct supernatural intervention. They then took him to the Pharisees who acted in those days as judges to discern what had happened to him. They immediately did the obvious by condemning Jesus for using clay on the Sabbath. Kneading (dough, and by analogy clay) was one of thirty-nine classes of work forbidden on the Sabbath. Pharisees were divided among themselves on many issues in Jesus’ day, and they had still not settled those issues by the end of the first century, when John was writing. They also came to the conclusion: because Jesus did not obey the Sabbatical laws, He was not from God. But then how do they make sense of the miraculous healing? How can Jesus be not from God?

The only conclusion they could think of was maybe he wasn’t born blind! They had to make sure and sent for his parents. His parents confirmed that he was indeed born blind and could not explain what had happened to their son. But they responded by saying: ask him because he is of age and can speak for himself. After the age of thirteen a Jewish boy became responsible for his own keeping of the commandments.

After a severe cross examination, they could not resolve the matter and threw the healed man out. Pharisaic law was scrupulous about cross-examining witnesses fairly and without prejudice. These interrogators thus violated Pharisaic ethical teaching. Excommunication was one of the severest forms of discipline administered by a synagogue community – something that happened to a lot of Jesus followers after the Jewish rebellion of 66-70AD. After the Jews lost the war, they regrouped in the city of Jabneh that was called Jamnia in the Greek and Roman periods. The Jewish Sanhedrin was re-formed after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It was at this Council of Jamnia that several drastic measures were taken against Christians such as the excommunication of all Christians from synagogues, and the circulation of anti-Christian slogans. I think John is referring to this in our reading! John’s readers had faced the danger or reality of expulsion from their synagogues. The faithfulness of this man would have been a great source of encouragement to them all to remain faithful too.

The interrogators confess that they do not know where Jesus is from while the healed man responded in faith. Then Jesus said to the Pharisees that they are actually blind too for not seeing the Saviour in front of their eyes! The concept of blindness was particularly appropriate for metaphorical use; it often characterized spiritual ‘blindness’ or lack of insight into the revelation of God like in this case!

## **Sermon**

The text for the sermon is verse : <sup>39</sup> *Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”*

When I was a student at the University of Pretoria there was a blind girl in my Latin

class who had a guide dog. She studied to be a teacher. Usually after the Latin class we would all see her walk to her next class with her dog. One particular day we saw her walking in the wrong direction without “seeing” at all! Later as the dog got more confused, they had apparently walked up and down one street near the campus - again with lots of people seeing what was going on - without seeing! It took one woman to see what was going on, offering to help her and her dog find the right class.

I guess that we all saw what was going on, but failed to see what was in front of our eyes, which was exactly the problem of the Pharisees too. The opportunity to have a relationship with Jesus passed in front of their eyes! Instead of listening to the testimony of the healed blind man, they threw him out. Jesus went out to seek and find him because they were blind to his miracle and deaf to his testimony.

Spiritual blindness is a common phenomenon today amongst Christians. We tend to see everything that is wrong in the world but OFTEN miss the things that are wrong in us, in our relationships and in our churches. We can be so busy doing the church’s work while missing the opportunity to meet with the God of the church.

It happens to all of us. We need therefore to be spiritually sensitive to our own and other’s needs. We need to have a living relationship with God. And we can only have it when we listen to Him, obey His words and follow in His footsteps. We can only have it when we have a prayer orientated life style, when we talk to God as often as we can. We also need to pray with our brothers and sisters in faith to hear how God is influencing their lives. We need to talk about God as often as we can. We need to make time to tell Him and be honest about all the things we cannot do, all the things we struggle with.

We need to tell him about our hurt and pain. We need to hold His hand as tight as we possibly can. And we MUST not let go talking to our children about God – even when they do not want to hear a word! We must do everything in our power to stop Spiritual starvation. We must drink of the LIFE GIVING water of Jesus as many times as possibly.

I was quite moved by the words of Jesus: “those who see will become blind”. Are we as followers of Jesus also spiritually blind? Are we also in need of a serious spiritual revival not only in ourselves, but also in all our relationships and even in our congregational life? Have we become like dry apple trees giving so much spiritually to others without taking any life giving water from Jesus ourselves to stay spiritually alive. You and I can be spiritually starving - seriously in need of the life giving water. We can even sit here in the church Sunday after Sunday pretending that we are spiritually fine while our lives of faith are deteriorating.

You and I must be honest with God this Lent. We must be honest and address our spiritual starvation. We must be honest when we worship and tell God about our struggles, our temptations, our lies, our falseness and our laziness not to pray or read the bible. We must use this Lent to drink from the life giving water of Jesus ourselves through our prayers and our commitment to read from and listen to God’s word. We must seek spiritual help when we realize we are spiritually in a very dark place!

The healed man gave you and me so much hope. When we are spiritually starving and blind, Jesus will help us too. He will come and fetch us when the world throws us out or stops speaking to us. He will not speak to us harshly or in a rude way.

May God help us this Lent not to miss the opportunity to “see” our own spiritual needs. May our eyes be open so that we can attend to our own spiritual starvation before we reach out to the world, before it is too late!

Amen