

Reading: Matthew 9:27-34 (NT page 974)

## **Background to the reading**

**Our reading this morning made me very excited, especially after wrestling with the text, reading it over and over again, studying the Greek words. It really gives us an interesting insight into the first century Mediterranean culture into which Jesus was born.**

Our reading is again about first century values of honour and shame. Part of this culture was the fact that some earned status of honour by ways of earning it through challenge and reposte (acquired honour), or through your birth into a honourable family (ascribed honour). Some professions was not regarded as honourable such as tax collectors, woman who was earning their own money and people who worked with either dead people or animals.

You could lose your status by someone else challenging you in public to respond better, or through negative labelling. If this was successful you were labelled as shameful. Labels and counter labels were potential social weapons. Positive labels such as “Son of David” “rock” or “Christ” could enhance honour and status I recognised by A COMMUNITY. It took only two witnesses to either free or condemn you in a court of law. Two blind people labels Jesus positively. The label “Son of David” was a honourable title in the sense that it associated the prophecies of Old Testament about a “Davidic king” who would come to rule forever with Jesus. The Jews of Jesus’ day expected the coming Messiah to be a descendant of David. SO these two blind men paid Jesus honour.

And then as Jesus went into a house, the two blind men came to him. Then Jesus asked them the question “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” which highlights a different dimension of faith. “In the New

Testament the words faith, have faith and believe refer to the social glue that binds one person to another”, in this case to Jesus. Jesus is asking them if they are willing to be part of his “label, “faction” or “group”, if they are committed to be loyal to him. Faith here means commitment to Jesus, personal loyalty and the solidarity that comes from such faithfulness (cf Malina & Rohrbaugh 1992:131)[i]. It is also interesting to note that Jesus acts in accordance to the prophecy of Isaiah 42 that the servant king, the expected Messiah will “open eyes that are blind”. In the Greek text it states that Jesus indeed “opened their eyes”, which is off course in line with the prophecies of the Old Testament.

But it seems they don’t do as Jesus told them, even after Jesus strong worded warning to them not to tell any other person. Why did Jesus not want others to know? Because Jesus acted again according to the prophecy of Isaiah 42 which stated that the servant of the Lord will “bring forth justice; till he establishes justice on earth”, which He did with his sacrifice on the cross. It is only after Jesus overpowered death that He commanded his disciples to go out and make disciples of all men. So Jesus wanted them to wait until He fulfilled his mission to “mend the broken relationship that existed between God and the human race.

In the second part of our reading another “man” came to Jesus. This man is described with one Greek word *Kophos*. It means literally “to be cut down” especially referring to one’s senses like the tongue or the ears, which could refer to someone one who is either deaf or dumb or both. According to our reading this was caused by a “demon”, which was the most common reason for disabilities and illnesses in antiquity, in the absence of post modern scientific explanations. Jesus “healed” this man which meant that he restored him to society because his honour depended on his “speaking and acting out in public”. The crowds marvelled at this miracle and acknowledged Jesus’ honour.

But then the Pharisees who were in shame, reacted by negative labelling Jesus as an evil deceiver to shame him in public. Negative labels such as “sinner”, unclean and barren, the prince of demons” hypocrites, false prophets were serious social weaponry to undermine honour, status and authority. If these labels could be made to stick – your credibility within your community would have been forever damaged.

But in each and every negative labelling Jesus rose to the challenge by :  
Stating that He is the enemy and victor of Satan,  
Denial of injury, the “man” is healed!

So what is the meaning of our reading?

Jesus came and broke down all the barriers that his society erected between people. He came to mend the broken, and heal those who were regarded as outcasts. He gave people who had no voice or social status the ability to live in a meaningful relationship with God and other people. He brought a new dimension of faith. To have faith in Him would mean sacrifice, loyalty and commitment. He has the ability and the power from God to open the eyes of all those who are spiritually blind.

I guess we can also see the damage that negative labeling can cause, which of course is very part of our society too!

Amen

**MP 582**  
**Sermon**

**Rock of ages**

Our reading gives us a very clear picture of the social values that existed in Jesus' time and how Jesus showed a new value system whereby people, even those without honour can belong to God through faith. In our reading Jesus brought three people into the fold of God and since his redemption, resurrection and ascension has included many other people in the fold of God's loving care, love and mercy.

We have entered Lent, the season where we celebrate the journey of Jesus to His final fulfilment of God's plan. He came to heal those who are ill, He opened the eyes of the blind and gave to those who had no voice a voice to speak out and proclaim His Holy Name. yes you and I have seen and experienced God's inclusive love through the deeds of Jesus. We have also seen the power of God through the deeds and acts of Jesus. Jesus showed that no human method of labelling will deter the plan of God.

In fact labelling like war never works especially when we try to undermine other people so that we can look good. During this time we must show that we as Christians do not need to undermine other people. God gave you and me a place on this earth to change hatred into love, strife into peace and hopelessness into hope. We do not have to fight or undermine other people to feel valued and respected. We are valued through the eyes of God. God died for our sins because He loved us first.

There is no need to be spiritually blind anymore. God has opened our eyes to see Him standing at our doors, inviting us to come to Him, inviting us to lean upon Him for strength and comfort. We have seen the Almighty Glory of God. If we do not see the miracles around us of God's intervention in our lives, then we must learn to focus.

Lent is not about you and me and our so called sacrifices by giving up something that is precious to us. Lent is about God who saved us all from sin, death and hell. It is indeed shocking that Lent has a “negative label” to some Christians as a time whereby we must mourn, and be miserable.

No Lent is THE time where we must dance with daffodils in our hands, rejoicing that God has saved us. We must be overcome with joy each and every second of Lent because God has healed the broken relationship between Him and us. We must learn to open our eyes to appreciate all the miracles and wonders of God’s loving care.

I LEARN a VERY IMPORTANT LESSON when we were on Safari last year. On our last day Nanda and I were desperate to see a cheetah in the wild. Our game ranger then took us to a mountain rock where she saw a cheetah before. And low and behold, after she stopped she took her binoculars and after a while said that a cheetah was lying on a rock about a few hundred meters away, covered by dense grass. She then passed on her binoculars for us all to see. But deary me, Nanda and I struggled to see anything. Even after a few pointers we could not see a thing. And then by gaining more patience and focus, I managed to spot the cheetah. It was at the same place I was looking before but I could not see because I was so negative, believing that I would not see it at all, and secondly because I was impatient.

We go through life – often not noticing the wonders and miracles of God right in front of us. And we do not notice them because we are either so busy labelling ourselves as people who are not worthy in the eyes of God or labelling God as being absent. And often we label other people as not having enough faith as if we are God and in a position to judge.

It is only when we focus on God and His love, that we start to really see His presence around us. So let us focus on Jesus this Lent and forget a wee minute about ourselves, our values and how wonderful we are. Because we are not. It is only by the grace of God that we are saved by his blood  
Amen

[i] Malina, Bruce, J & Rohrbaugh, Richard, L 1992. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress.