

Lent IV (A)  
*I Samuel* 16.1-13; *Ephesians* 5.8-14; *John* 9.1-41  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
2 March 2008

Good Questions & Bad

~Paul H. Friesen~

Questions are important in what we call democratic countries, or open societies, and inside institutions and communities. Parents today teach children to ask questions for their own safety and journalists love opportunities to put questions to politicians. We are suspicious of religious groups or Christian denominations that discourage questions.

In fact, when it comes to our Scriptures—perhaps to the surprise of atheists—we find no end of questions asked by religious people. This truth struck me hard a number of years ago, the first Lent after I was ordained an Anglican deacon.

In the parish in which I was ordained it was the custom for the deacon to chant the Gospel every Sunday. My first problem was that I was not a trained singer. My second was that in the gallery above me stood a famous choir that had made numerous recordings, and in the choir behind me in the chancel was a chorus that gave hours each Sunday to singing the psalms in Gregorian Chant. They were quite kind to me those early months and assigned a cantor to train me, but you can see my situation!

My third problem was that it was 'Year A'—Anglicans, you many now, are on a three year—150 plus—Sunday cycle in which they read through large portions of the Bible. In the Lent of Year A then, I had to sing my way, in public, through what I called 'the monster Gospels'—very long Gospel passages from *The Gospel According to St. John*, each with many questions.

And related to this was my fourth and final problem.

It was possible to learn to chant the simple Gospel tone that had only two notes for every sentence; but every time a Deacon hit a question he or she had to launch into a more complicated musical phrase—and end up, musically, where one had started So you can imagine how the sweat beaded on my forehead when I came to today's Gospel as I stood in the centre of the church and saw in my hands the fourteen questions of today's Year A Gospel.

I made it to the end, but it wasn't very pretty. But I have never forgotten how many questions there are in John's Gospel

But not all questions are equal, that's why today's Gospel caught my attention. There are fourteen direct questions and more of them implied, but are they all equally helpful?

In this remarkable story everyone seems to ask questions: Jesus' disciples, the neighbours and acquaintances of the man born blind, the Pharisees, the man himself, and Jesus himself. And yet they fall into two kinds of questions: *those that open us up to the truth about God and ourselves*, and *questions that are intended to protect us from knowing the truth about God and ourselves*.

The disciples, so much like us, get to say the first word and ask the first question in the story. They ask what seems to be an intelligent theological question, meant to open up the truth about an issue: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?' It was the sort of question that other disciples asked their Rabbis as they followed them on foot through a town.<sup>1</sup> We can imagine them nudging each other to get the words just right.

But something is wrong, and it is noticed immediately by Jean Vanier, the founder of *L'Arche* communities for the handicapped, in his commentary on John's Gospel. The disciples are not only asking the wrong question, they're looking the wrong direction.

Vanier says, the disciples are 'talking *about* a person with a disability...it is as if he is a nobody.'<sup>2</sup> They don't really see the man, probably begging for money, at all. But Jesus doesn't ignore their question, he surprises them with his answer—in fact the disciples are so surprised they quit their line of questioning and remain silent, wisely, for the rest of the story.

Jesus says, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' What? He was born blind so that after years of disability Jesus could walk by and show off his power? It is a cruel thought used to occur to me when I read this passage.

No, says Jean Vanier, 'Each of us is born so that God's work may be accomplished in us.'<sup>3</sup> We have each been created to serve each other, and our world, and so glorify our God. And in this case, God's work is taken one step further on that dusty street.

Others would remain blind, and glorify God. But this man would reveal God's glory in a new way, and really open the eyes of those who could already see the dirt underneath their feet.

This is all in instant, and Jesus turns from his disciples to the man. What happens must be interpreted in the light of the creation story in our Bible: 'the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his

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<sup>1</sup> See a similar example drawn from the Jerusalem Targum in George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John* (Waco: Word, 1987), p.154.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), p.171.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Vanier, *ibid*, p. 172.

nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.’<sup>4</sup> So Jesus, we hear, breathes into a handful of earth and places it on the man’s eyes. This biblical action could not have been misunderstood by anyone.

And the man goes off to the pool to wash, at Jesus’ word, and leaves with physical sight. God’s glory has been revealed in a second work of creation, just like it was in the first.

And now the questions begun so innocently, but mistakenly by the disciples are picked up by the other religious leaders. John’s Gospel sometimes calls them ‘the Pharisees’, and sometimes calls them ‘the Jews’. They are not the questions of one religion or ethnic group as opposed to another, for almost all the early Christians were Jewish.

They are the questions of religious professionals and the seriously religious who see they might lose something if they don’t go on the offence. *They were questions that were intended to protect them from knowing the truth about God and themselves.* They were *status quo* questions, and most of us are pretty good at asking them ourselves.

The man’s neighbours and friends don’t understand, nor do his parents. Instead of rejoicing a cloud of fear and suspicion rises and grows larger and larger. Given what has happened, that a blind man now sees, the questions seem absurd and become more aggressive.

“How is a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” “They said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It is your eyes he opened.” “Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?” “What did he do you? How did he open your eyes?”

It seems as if all the energy was going to figure out what went wrong instead of what went right. God’s glory had been revealed in someone who was supposed to have been kept neatly in his place by the side of the street. But even all the wrong questions weren’t strong enough to stop the right ones being asked. Near the end of the story, when the wonderful event in this man’s life seems to have had almost all the goodness sucked out of it, Jesus finds the man. And two very good questions are asked, one by Jesus, and one by the man who had received sight.

‘When [Jesus] found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.”’ We have heard what follows. The man who received physical sight goes on to be spiritually enlightened, to receive his spiritual sight.

The Pharisees have allowed themselves to see a little, but not nearly enough to change their way of life. ‘Your sin remains’ is Jesus’ last word to them. *They*

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 2.7. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

*have never gone beyond asking questions intended to protect them from knowing the truth about God and ourselves.* Their spiritual life is a neat box from which they do not wish to be liberated. The light is too strong for them.

On the other hand, the man who received sight twice is the new disciple we are meant to imitate. And the 'Son of Man', also known as Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is the one we are meant to follow.

The new disciple has learned to hear the question that we are all asked: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' And he learns to ask the *question that open us up to the truth about God and ourselves.* 'Who is the Son of Man? Tell me that I may believe in him.'

We are all tempted, and every parish is tempted to ask questions that keep God in God's place, a place that doesn't threaten our habits, and patterns, and plans, and our pieties. We are tempted, like the disciples, to see the people around us—'good' and 'bad'—as illustrations of our tidy religious systems.

It is why we miss seeing people as they were meant to be seen, as our fellows created to reveal God's glory, however God means to do that, in whatever surprising and wonderful way it comes about.

Today's Gospel invites us to hear the question of Jesus at the Table of the Lord, and at coffee hours, and as we walk about Halifax beside each other: Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe he came to redeem us, to complete the work of creation? Do you believe that God's glory is revealed in us?

We will have many chances this week to ask the right questions. Nothing will stop us from asking the name of the beggar on the street, or about the condition of someone's life.

And nothing can stop us, really, from hearing and answering the right question, 'Do you believe in Jesus?'—and the right questions: 'What does the life and death and resurrection of Jesus have to do with how you are living your life, and making decisions, and treating other people?' 'What does this have to do with how we come to worship, and make parish decisions, and volunteer our time and money, and most of all ourselves?'

Thanks be to God for the man born blind, and for his healing, and for his spiritual sight. Thanks be to God for his question. May we all, in God's mercy, walk beside him as we follow Jesus Christ.