

Last week in [\*the archeology of a story\*](#) I noted that John's approach to story is different from that of Mark, Matthew and Luke where stories flow out of events. In John it's the other way around. The event emerges out of the story.

A good example of this is the first of John's Seven Signs of the Kingdom - the much-loved story about the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Is this a real event or is it an event created by the story John tells to make a point about Jesus? John's stories are created to reveal Jesus' identity rather than as accounts of what did or did not happen.

Today we are two weeks away from the start of Holy Week – a week ending in the *Great Three Days* of Jesus' death and resurrection. On the Fourth Sunday in Lent the scene opens onto John's sixth Sign of the Kingdom – the healing of the man

born blind. There's only one Sign left after this – the raising of Lazarus and as its title suggests this is a time sensitive story that prepares us for the journey through Holy Week to the Great Three Days of Easter.

On the face of it - the healing of the man born blind is a story about two kinds of blindness. John wants us to see – ha – *see*, note the play on words – that this is not only a story about how Jesus cured a man's physical blindness, but how he struggled with the community's spiritual blindness – that is their refusal to see. It seems Jesus can restore physical sight but is powerless to remove a community's blindness - which continues as a barrier preventing the dawning of deeper sight – that is – the discovery of insight.

I'm struck by the way John constructs this story. It's not a story about any

old blind man, it's a story about a man *born* blind. It's not a story about a man who loses his sight as the result of a misfortune. It's a story about a man born into a state of blindness.

There are two groups of by-standers in this story. There is the man's family and neighbors. Then there's the godly -Jesus' disciples and the serious religious types. The man's neighbors are overjoyed when he gains his sight. The godly types are perplexed if not downright disconcerted. They ask: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* Jesus will have none of this. In answer to the question, he tells them, *neither!*

Jesus spits on the ground to make a poultice of mud and spreads it over the man's eyes. There's another whole sermon in this simple act. For here we again see the [homeopathic](#)

[principle](#) in operation. The Hebrew for ground is *adamah* and the word for the first human being is Adam. Genesis tells us that Adam was made from *adamah* – the ground. We are formed out of the dust of the earth and it's this same dust that holds the key to our healing. But I digress.

Having spread the mud poultice over the man's eyes, Jesus tells him to go wash in the pool of Siloam. He does so and returns able to see for the first time in his life – an outcome that amazes his family and neighbors. Yet for the godly among the by-standers, this is a deeply concerning outcome. Their question to Jesus is not how was this man born blind but who sinned that this man was born blind? Blindness is not the issue here, but sin – more particularly - punishment for sin.

Today we understand that in premodern societies illness and sin

were closely aligned. Sin explained the arbitrariness of illness – why him and not me, why me and not her? We don't think this way today because in the wake of advances in medicine we know better. Or maybe it's just that we think we do.

Today, medical science offers us an explanation for illness. Medical science may explain how and even why someone develops an illness, but in the face of incurable illness knowing the how and why still leaves us with the unanswered question – why them and not me? Medical science has no answer for the sheer arbitrariness of the way illness strikes some and not others. We're quick to disavow sinful behavior as a cause for illness. Yet beneath the surface - accusations of carelessness and negligence in lifestyle often persist and are not a million miles away from a notion of sin and blame.

The *why him and not me* question lies at the heart of *the who sinned* question of the godly by-standers in John's story. Medical science may explain the causes of illness, but it remains silent before the question of suffering and punishment. Sin as a cause of illness address the question of suffering and punishment head on.

No amount of medical knowledge can reassure us against the arbitrary and indiscriminate injustice of suffering. Nevertheless, we still seek reassurance in the way we try to distance those who suffer from those who don't.

We're not that different from the godly in John's story. We have many ways of assigning blame to reassure ourselves that we are different from the ill who suffer. *She's only got herself to blame* – we say if we're brave enough or just think if we're not. Afterall *he should have worn a*

*mask – or they should have been vaccinated – or even more far-fetched - it's because they were vaccinated that they became vulnerable to infection. She should have smoked less, he should have drunk less, you should have not eaten so much.* Our need to pronounce judgement is endless. What matters is that we find an explanation for reassuring ourselves by denying our own vulnerability.

We draw distinctions between conditions we can reasonably catch and those we feel safe from catching. Allowing for the hypothetical that we all may develop cancer - we feel safe around cancer patients because after all they have it and we don't. We comfort ourselves with the knowledge that we are not a member of a vulnerable population that is genetically predisposed to diabetes or heart disease. We congratulate ourselves on controlling our food

intake, drink in moderation, and exercise regularly. Protected by the illusion of reassurance we are too ready to sit in judgment of the afflicted.

As we continue to recover from the Corona Virus plague – as a society we've been shocked by how hard it is to maintain the fiction of a protective barrier between us and them. How easily we reverted to ancient fears of contamination from conditions transmittable on the air, through touch, or proximity. How quickly those in authority stoked public fear as we reverted to the ancient remedy of quarantine with all its attendant moral judgements. We've been painfully reminded of what it feels like to be treated as a plague carrier. We've quickly rediscovered that quarantine is as much a moral as it is a physical segregation.

Having worked for 18 years in acute mental health ministry, I've long pondered public fear of those who experience mental illness. Who says the practice of shunning is dead?

Following one of my first patient groups one man who seemed struck by my rapport with the group asked me if I'd ever had mental illness - to which I replied - I've never been diagnosed. Mental and emotional disturbance- whether it ascends to the degree of psychiatric diagnosis is a matter of there but for the grace of God go we.

John's story of the man born blind is the sixth in his Seven Signs of the Kingdom - which are all theological stories constructed to reveal Jesus' divine identity to those capable of moving from blindness to sight, and from sight to insight. For John, Jesus and God are indivisible - a feature that distinguishes his Christology

from that of the other Evangelists.

Yet, the story of the man born blind is also a story about our denial of human vulnerability and our conflation of illness and suffering as punishment. In John's story of the healing of the man born blind Jesus challenges us to open our eyes to a new world view - and turn away from judgement and embrace our common solidarity.

If we can what will we discover in moving from blindness to sight and from sight to insight?

In his 1947 novel *The Plague* Albert Camus echoes John's portrayal of the tension between Jesus and the godly-bystanders - his disciples and the Pharisees - when he contrasts the responses of Oran's doctor and the parish priest. The priest condemns the suffering he sees explaining it away as God's punishment for sin. Who has sinned - Jesus disciples ask

him? This man has sinned by healing on the sabbath - the Pharisees complain. Both seek to distance themselves from the arbitrary, indiscriminate nature of illness and suffering.

Camus' doctor knows that suffering is a cosmic tragedy -and if accepted as such leads to a softening of the heart. Camus' doctor says *that the only way to fight the plague is with decency.* When asked what decency means, the doctor responds that decency: *is doing my job.*

Decency means committing to living lives of courage -trust fueled by hope. Not the fairytale hope in faith as some magical protection, some divine insurance policy, a denial of vulnerability, but the hope rooted in a refusal to be defeated by fear in

response to the seeming random unpredictability of illness and suffering.

The man born blind moved from blindness to sight, and from sight to insight. When we do likewise, we find a surprising rediscovery. In the face of fear, we just need to be decent enough to do the job God called us here to do.

At the Last Supper, having washed his disciples' feet John has Jesus give them a new commandment to love one another so that the world may know them by their shared solidarity. Accepting we're all equally vulnerable to the misfortunes of illness and suffering – that we are all in this predicament together - is the greatest sign of Christian solidarity.