

A sermon for the Third Sunday of Lent on the East Window.
Scriptures: Isaiah 35.1-10 and John 9.1-7

Several years ago, we lived in a house in West Yorkshire which had a very large stained glass window at the top of the stairs .It was a 1930's window .It had on it a sailing ship and a sunrise. I can't say we took much notice of it as the children were young at the time and we were usually dashing past it getting the kids ready for school. One dark winter night –it was a Saturday evening, the doorbell rang and a stranger stood at the door. “I was just driving past,” he said, “and I saw your window.” He was an American. “I sure like your window, and I'd like to buy it” and he pulled a cheque book out of his pocket !! I had to explain to him that the house was a vicarage and the window wasn't mine to sell.(I don't know what the Parsonage Board would have thought!) I told him he could look, but not buy.

Well we cannot buy our great East Window here at St. John's either. And being by the eminent Victorian artist, Henry Holiday –it may be worth quite a lot. We cannot buy it, but once again we are invited to look and this morning we are invited to look particularly at the second column in from the right.

Firstly some general comments about church windows. We can read them as a sort of building .The higher levels –the top floor –is usually the life of heaven –populated by angels and sometimes by images of God and the saints in glory. The middle level is usually the earthly ministry of Christ –stories from the gospels , and the lowest level –the foundation –is usually figures from the Old Testament. That is because the Old Testament is the foundation for the New. The New is built on it. In other words the Life of Christ only makes sense within the bigger story of the Old Testament and its various characters. Those Old Testament stories that we know; he knew too. And as they informed him and shaped him, so they inform and shape us.

This may lead us to consider what are our own life's foundations? What is it that is absolutely vital to us...without which we cannot stand? What is it that gives us a sense of self, a sense of worth? What gets us out of bed in the morning? For most people, the love of family and friends is pretty foundational ,is something vital. For many folk it's a sense of

something useful to be done, a cause to embrace, a corner to fight, or a role to fulfil. The foundational things are the things which make us who we are, the things that really matter. And somewhere in those things that really matter will be our faith, our longing for God. We may find it difficult to put our faith into words, even to ourselves, but we know by our being here, by our belonging here, that our faith matters to us. It makes us who we are .It is part of our foundations.

And coming to our second column in from the right and to the ground floor, we see a figure holding an open book .This is a bit of artistic license, as books were not invented until New Testament times, but the book suggests an author. Henry Holiday wants us to look at his window and try to guess who he might be, because he could be any of the prophets. The only clue is that the text above his head reads, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened” and as we know, that is a text from Isaiah.

So it is Isaiah looking out at us. Henry Holiday could have used the conventional symbol of having Isaiah hold a two handled saw .He is often shown holding such a saw. This is not because he was a woodsman, but for the far more grisly reason that by tradition, Isaiah met his death by being sawn in two. This is referred to in Hebrews chapter 11 on the heroes of faith, the great cloud of witnesses. Henry Holiday shuns this rather graphic imagery .But it is Isaiah who looks out at us, and what greater prophet is there to stand at the foundations and to inform and shape both the life of Christ and our faith too?

Isaiah is the most quoted of all the prophets .His words are the most familiar.

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light....*

*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people,
says the Lord....*

*In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord,
And he was .high and lifted up and his train filled the Temple...
and the angels cried to one to another “holy, holy, holy”.....*

*The lion shall lie down with the lamb
and the leopard with the kid,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*....they will not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain.....*

*A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will
not quench.....*

*Surely he has born our grief
and carried our sorrows....*

We could go on –all morning! The words of Isaiah are familiar words. If you look up, as I did, the number of times Isaiah is used in the Sunday Lectionary, the set readings for a three year cycle, Isaiah comes in first amongst the prophets at sixty nine times. (Beat that Jeremiah!) Jeremiah comes in at twenty seven times and Daniel only gets five mentions! Isaiah is there in the Christian foundations. His language and his poetry shape us. We hear his words year by year, especially around Advent and Christmas and Passiontide. He says more about the nature of the coming Messiah than any other. And his words must have shaped Christ's understanding of himself.

Christ is the fulfilment of Isaiah's words. There is the link verse joining the two floors of our building. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened" (Isaiah 35 v.5) and there above on the second level is Christ opening the eyes of the blind. The blind man is on the left. He looks somewhat well dressed to be a beggar in his white garment and his flowing green robe. He is bending slightly so that Christ on the right can anoint his eyes. Christ spat and touched the man's eyes. There was a common belief in the healing power of saliva.

It reminds me of being a child .Do you remember when your Mum would spit on a handkerchief and wipe around your mouth before you could be presentable?

The figure in the middle is also haloed and so must be the evangelist, the witness. Could it be St. John (from this morning's gospel) or could it be one of the other Evangelists?

It may surprise us to consider how few times in the Bible there are healings from blindness. There are none -to my knowledge -in the Old Testament. So when Isaiah said that "the eyes of the blind shall be opened" was he being literal, or was he meaning it as a metaphor for simply being enlightened?

But Jesus took Isaiah's words literally. He preached on a

similar text from Isaiah at his sermon in Nazareth, his home town. (Luke 4) *He sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind...and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* And he said to the congregation, "Today, this text is fulfilled in your hearing"

And there were healings from blindness; though perhaps not the hundreds that people sometimes think. Apart from general statements about the blind being healed when crowds came to Jesus, there are only three detailed accounts that we can clearly identify. There may be two more in Matthew; but they are very brief.

So just three individual cases we know much about. There was Bartimaeus at Jericho, the one who shouted out for attention as Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem .He was a model of persistence and kept shouting until Jesus heard him and called him. That isn't him in the window because we are told he threw off his cloak in his urgency to get to Jesus. (Mark 8.50) Our man has a green cloak.

Then there was the man at Bethsaida in Galilee, brought to Jesus by friends, and taken aside while Jesus anointed his eyes and it didn't quite work at first. "Do you see anything?" said Jesus. And he said, "I see men, but they look like trees walking" He needed a second touch before his sight was restored. There is such a note of authenticity about that account that it must be accurate .And it reminds us that whatever our Christian experience, we all need "a second touch" and a third and a fourth....In other words, there are areas of our lives we will always be needing to present to Christ for healing. Could it be him in the window?

Or finally, there is the man born blind, a story set in Jerusalem and the subject of this morning's gospel. This story follows on from Jesus saying, "I am the Light of the world" It's almost an illustration of it. It comes in the middle of a great argument with the religious teachers. It is an astonishing event, because the man has never seen before. He was born blind.

We notice in the gospel how Jesus rejects the old conviction which is still around today in many cultures that illness is somehow linked to sin. "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" Neither, says Jesus .But this is an opportunity to show the work of God. Hopefully we have outgrown such simple reasoning and

know a bit more today about the causes of illness and disability. We have to watch ourselves though. We may no longer blame the sick for being ill, but we sometimes blame the poor for being poor.

“The eyes of the blind shall be opened.” Isaiah’s words. Christ’s actions. Think for a moment how these accounts have inspired generations of doctors,-many of them Christians -to devote their lives to eye-surgery, especially in those parts of the world where medical care is hard to come by .It brings to life those words –also in St. John “greater things than these shall you do, because I go to the Father” (14.12)

So ,our East window ,that we cannot buy, but given the gift of sight we can come here and look at it and–in a sense –read it ,or use it to remind ourselves of certain important things. We think of the foundations of our lives; of the things that matter,of our longing for God, of our faith, and of the poetry and imagery of Isaiah; words that by repetition and familiarity become part us. We give thanks also for the gift of sight and we are mindful of those who cannot see and pray for them and for those who assist them. And finally, we wonder about those things that we are– in a sense- blind to, unaware of, and where we still need Christ’s touch.