St Matthew in-the-City

# Learning to See

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Year A, 4th Sunday of Lent
1 Samuel 16:1–13 | John 9:1–41
15 March 2026

One of the most persistent habits human beings have, is the need to explain suffering. When something goes wrong, we want to know why. We ask questions that are meant to make the world feel orderly again: What caused this? Who is responsible? What did they do?

Sometimes those questions lead to understanding. But, more often than not, they reveal something else: our deep discomfort with uncertainty. If suffering has a clear cause, then perhaps the world still makes sense. Perhaps it still feels manageable.

The Gospel reading today from St John begins with exactly that impulse.

The disciples see a man who has been blind from birth, and their first instinct is not curiosity about the man himself. Instead, they ask a theological question: “Who sinned?” Was it this man, or his parents?

It’s a revealing moment. Before they see him as a person, they see him as a problem to solve.

His life becomes a case study in how suffering works. And the framework they reach for is one that has appeared in many religious traditions across history: the idea that suffering must somehow be connected to wrongdoing.

If something bad has happened, then someone must deserve it. It’s a tidy system. It preserves the idea that the world is fair, but it comes with a heavy cost. Because it turns human pain into a moral explanation. And that is exactly the logic Jesus refuses. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” With that one sentence, Jesus dismantles the whole framework the disciples are working with.

He refuses the idea that suffering must always have a moral cause, and that shift is more radical than it might first appear. Because once you remove the easy explanations, something uncomfortable remains.

Sometimes suffering simply exists. Sometimes human pain cannot be neatly explained or justified. And if that is true, then the question changes.

Instead of asking **who is to blame**, we are invited to ask something else entirely. What does compassion require here? What does healing look like? Where is God at work in this moment?

The story that follows in John's Gospel shows how difficult that shift can be for communities. Because once the man receives his sight, the conversation does not immediately turn toward celebration. Instead, the system begins to defend itself. People argue about rules, authorities investigate and questions multiply.

The problem is not that the healing happened. The problem is that it doesn't fit comfortably within the categories people rely on to interpret reality. And so, the conversation drifts back toward protecting those categories.

It's a very human response. Whenever our assumptions about the world are challenged, our first instinct is often not to rethink those assumptions, it is to protect them. The Gospel story exposes that instinct with uncomfortable clarity.

Because the people struggling to recognise what is happening are not outsiders. They are the religious experts. The interpreters of tradition. The people responsible for maintaining the theological system that explains how God works.

And yet the story suggests that systems, religious, social and political, can sometimes become so invested in their own coherence that they struggle to recognise the truth when it appears in front of them.

That is why the theme of sight runs so strongly through this chapter.

The man who once could not see, gradually comes to understand more and more about what has happened to him. Meanwhile those who insist

that they see clearly become increasingly unable to recognise what is unfolding. It is a powerful reversal. But it is also a familiar one.

Human history is full of moments when societies have defended their systems even when those systems failed to account for human reality. When voices from the margins have been dismissed because they disrupted the dominant narrative. When people who spoke honestly about their experience were treated as an inconvenient rather than heard as witnesses to something important.

And that dynamic does not belong only to the ancient world. It appears in every generation.

Today in Aotearoa, many people are pausing to remember the anniversary of the mosque attacks in Christchurch.

It remains a day of grief, but also a day of reflection.

Because tragedies like that force societies to examine the assumptions that shape how people see one another. Violence of that kind does not emerge out of nowhere. It grows slowly in environments where fear is allowed to shape perception. Where difference is framed as danger. Where entire communities become defined by stereotypes rather than recognised as neighbours.

Those patterns don't feel extreme to the people who hold them. They often feel ordinary, even rational. Which is precisely what makes them dangerous. Because blindness in the biblical sense is not simply the inability to perceive something. It is the failure, or refusal, to recognise another person's full humanity. The Gospel's language of sight helps name that danger.

It asks communities to pay attention not only to what they believe, but to how those beliefs shape the way they see others. Do they create openness? Or suspicion? Do they expand compassion? Or narrow it?

Faith, in this sense, is not only about theological ideas. It is about vision. About learning to see the world differently. And that kind of vision often emerges from unexpected places.

In John's Gospel, the person who sees most clearly by the end of the story is not a religious authority. It is the man who spent his life on the margins. The one who had been overlooked. The one whose experience did not fit the neat explanations others preferred.

That detail matters.

Because it suggests that truth is not always located where power assumes it will be. Sometimes clarity comes from those whose voices have not been given much weight. Sometimes the people who have been excluded from the centre see the world more honestly than those who control the system.

And that possibility requires humility from communities of faith. It asks us to remain open to the idea that our own vision may still need adjusting. That our assumptions may not tell the whole story. That God may be at work in ways that challenge the frameworks we find comfortable. Which may be why the final words of Jesus in this chapter are so striking.

*"If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."*

It is not blindness itself that causes the problem. It is the refusal to admit that we might not see clearly. The Gospel leaves us with a question that every generation must answer for itself.

Are we willing to recognise the limits of our own vision?

Are we willing to listen when people speak from experiences we have not shared?

Are we willing to allow compassion, not certainty, to shape the way we see the world?

Because the story of faith is not about people who have perfect sight. It is about people whose eyes are still opening.

People who are learning, again and again, how to see one another, and the presence of God, with greater clarity.

Amen.