

20140330Lent4Sermon

In Lent we have been looking at the Sunday Gospel's Themes and linked them to themes in John Bunyan's delightful allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The Gospel theme this Sunday is, to put it simply, the man born blind is healed. But having said that and having heard this long Gospel read, you can see this simple sentence barely touches the themes that develop in this Gospel. It is a long story with lots happening - more or less a debate between Jesus, his disciples, the man born blind, the parents of the man and the scribes and Pharisees.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian has nearly reached his destination. He is in a fair and pleasant place called Beulah. The term comes from Isaiah chapter 62 which reads:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, // and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, // until her vindication shines out like the dawn, // and her salvation like a burning torch. // 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. 4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken, // and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; // but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, // and your land Married; // for the Lord delights in you, // and your land shall be married.

In the old King James version the word "Beulah" is used instead of "married" in the verse "but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, // and your land Beulah;" So Beulah land is that special place which is like the beautiful relationship we find in good marriages. In other words, a place where we find love, sharing, compassion and warmth. What Bunyan was trying to convey to his readers is that after facing the trials and tribulations of human life on earth, Christian (in fact all of us who seeking to live our lives under God) find ourselves in a place where we find love, sharing, compassion and warmth.

What makes Beulah land so pleasant? Firstly, the eye of flesh is dim while the eye of faith is clear. This links us to our Gospel. Here we have a man born blind, man whose eyes are not just dimmed but see nothing and have never see anything. Jesus makes a mud paste and places it on the man's eyes and tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam which, Luke significantly tells us means 'sent'. The man returns able to see. This starts a furious argument between those who know him - "wasn't this the man who was blind and use to beg?" Some say yes some say no. The Pharisees are fetched to give their viewpoint on the event. They as per usual get caught up over the legality of the whole thing - it being the Sabbath. So the parents are fetched and questioned. They are a bit scared to give their honest opinions so they fudge an answer; Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself. And speak for himself he certainly does. The crowd is concerned on the how and the why and the what but the formerly blind man says: 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' I love that reply! It is a first century version of some one saying, "Get real, man!"

In Beulah land the eye of flesh is dim and the eye of faith is clear. That formerly blind man wasn't interested in the how and the whys and the whats. All he knew was that once he was blind but now he could see. That blind man was in Beulah land.

This whole episode reminded me of what happened at our Archdeaconry fellowship last week. One of our clergy was saying that her parishioners who live all over the peninsula including the gangster-riddled townships of Mitchell's Plain had asked her to come and prayer with them and she felt moved to start a prayer-walk from the home of her parishioner to the drug-dealers houses in the area. So dressed in her cassock she moved from house to house with her parishioner and their friends and family praying that God would drive out evil. It was a moving story, but most of us clergy were also aware that Mitchell's Plain was neither in her parish or even in the same Diocese that she worked in. Had she informed the local rector and bishop of her actions, we asked? This clergy person battled to understand our question, our concern. "I was doing God's work" she said, "Do you mean to say I must first ask a bishop permission before obeying God?" As I read today's gospel I felt so like the Pharisees, worrying whether the man was healed and how and when he was healed being more important than the fact that he was healed. Were I

and the other clergy more concerned about protocol and rules and regulasies than the need for prayer for the people of Mitchell's Plain?

Christian and his companion, Hopeful are nearing the Celestial City which is heaven- the place we go to when we die; not because they are ripe of years but they are mature of spirit. If only the Church leaders had that maturity of spirit at all times. Bunyan draws from Jerusalem's future glory described in Isaiah 62. The consummate future glory of Jerusalem, that is the brightness of her righteousness which will be acknowledged throughout the earth, is portrayed by Bunyan as that overflow of the glory of heaven that reaches those who will shortly become its citizens. This protective atmosphere was on that man born blind. He knew only one thing. Once he was blind, now he could see.

Us Christians talk about eternal life but it is not something that happens only when we die. We enter eternal life when we become one with Christ even in this life. For Bunyan, this longing for heaven was no mere theoretical expression of his doctrinal beliefs but rather the very panting and craving of his soul. In December of 1899, the famous evangelist D. L. Moody being near death and slipping away, declared: *Earth recedes; heaven opens before me. . . . No, this is no dream, Will [his son], . . . It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. There is no valley here. God is calling me and I must go. . . . This is my triumph; this is my Coronation Day! I have been looking forward to it for years.* Where Christian and Hopeful were, was a place of restored union or marriage named Beulah. Just as the land of Israel, in Isaiah was formerly abandoned by God and known as "desolate" would again become united to God, or "married" to Him, and known by the new name of "Beulah"; so for Bunyan, the Country of Beulah belongs to God who resides just across the River of Death nearby. For this reason it is specially protected territory; and Christian and Hopeful, as those who God "delights in," are also under His particular providence and protection. Beulah land is a place to be compared with spring time after winter, with sweet air, singing birds and scented flowers. Beulah land is a place of constant sunshine and no backward vista. Christian did not have to look back to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. That man born blind didn't look back to the darkness he had experienced all his life up to this point. He could look, yes, **look** forward.

Beulah land is a place of encouragement, a place to look forward. On Hill Clear, Christian could see the Celestial City only hazily through a bad telescope. Here the close-up vision of the Celestial City is positively dazzling. Beulah land is a place where Christ's rejoicing and covenant love hovers. Christ's love for his bride, represented by Christian and Hopeful, is ratified that anticipate an imminent union. It is called Married in our translation of the bible because that is what Beulah means, we, the Church are the Bride of Christ. He is the bridegroom. As he came and healed the man born blind and placed him in a beautiful situation; so he will come to us. Are your lamps trimmed and ready? Do you have enough oil?

The idea of Beulah land is a strong doctrine among reformed Calvinist tradition that Bunyan belonged to and his idea was developed by the very evangelical hymn writer Fanny Crosby. Fanny, coincidently was blind soon after birth but she wrote over 8000 hymns included old favourites such as *Blessed Assurance*, *Pass me not O gentle saviour* and to *God be the glory*. This morning as a prayer let us sing *I have entered Beulah land* by Fanny Crosby the music by John Sweeney.