

HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE

JOHN 9: 1-41

Here's mud in your eye.

What does that expression mean to you?

To me it's a term of celebration – it's used raising a glass to someone or something

At least in my experience it isn't used at formal occasions (I don't think anyone is going to be saying that at Will and Kate's wedding for example) but rather in real, common, down-to-earth situations. You say that when you're among friends. People who are comfortable with one another. It is, if you will pardon the pun, an earthy expression. I like it. Here's mud in your eye. It's a toast to the common place; a toast to the easy relationships where you can put your feet up and not worry about whether you have dirt on your face; to the holiness of the plain and the simple.

When I read this story, it makes me feel like raising just such a toast – to the simple and amazing story of this man, who regained his sight.

To Jesus, who invites us to do the same.

To John, who has written this Gospel with a genius that makes me want to cheer

and to our Creator who fashioned the whole bunch of us out of the dust of the earth to which we will return, and calls us to use the time in between to SEE in a way that will create and recreate the world.

This story is so cool. I just love it.

It's funny and sad and simple and deep and very, very real. I'd love to make a movie of it someday. Or at least a play. If I did that, what role would you want to play? Who would you cast as the blind man? (the poor guy doesn't even get a name)

I think that I would have to have three stages – try to picture this:

John has this story set up in three parts: Jesus with the man, at the beginning and at the end of the story. So I think that those two scenes would be on a stage in the back. Then, a little closer to the front, a stage for the man and his neighbours. Then right in front, a stage where the Pharisees do their thing.

(Just as an aside, it's important to say that while the Pharisees get a very bad rap here, scripture itself presents them in a positive light sometimes too, and we would be doing the text, and the Word of God a serious disservice if we forgot that, and drew conclusions about Jews in general from this)

(and another aside – and I WILL get to the point in a minute! The three depths of staging could easily be representing the layers of time involved in John's writing: his writing is set in the time of Jesus, true, but he's also writing about his own time and his own circumstances. By the time of John, the church and the synagogue were in serious trouble with one another, the Temple had fallen, and you can see that as people like this man, and Jesus to Nicodemus, and with the Samaritan woman, say “we” instead of “I” as though they are speaking for groups of people which in fact they were. Scripture is always talking about more than one thing at a time. And of course he's speaking and writing about the time of the worshipping community who has gathered to read and hear his Gospel. So, the three stages, with lights flowing from one to the other in a way show how the Spirit of God illumines our world from Jesus, and then through those who witness to him, and then to us.

So back to the text. Can you picture those stages? A place for Jesus and the man at the back. A place for the man and his neighbours in the middle, and finally right in front where we can't avoid them, right in our faces, sort of like mud splashing in our faces as a huge truck goes by, no way to avoid the

mess, here we have the controversy with the Pharisees.

And the light shines on each stage in turn as John leads us through. Lights up on the back stage.

Read 1-7 Isn't that wonderful?

Light. Clay. Water. WE'RE TALKING ABOUT CREATION HERE, there's no way around it. Whatever else is happening in this story, we are being asked to bring to mind the One who said "let there be light" and made humans from – from what? From the dust of the earth, from clay. Humans from the humus, as it were. Water – washing in water, coming new out of the water, you just know that this is deeper than it first appears. Primal – it makes you want to wade in and get muddy all over. AND it makes you want to ask in this passage – what is being created? Who is being created? Where is creation happening here? Good questions to keep in mind as we move on.

And just by the way – while we're in that space, considering the Creator and the original intention for this ball of mud we live on, and how life ought to be for us earthy creatures, John leaps in and answers once and for all the old question: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Is it punishment from God?

Who sinned, rabbi, this man or his parents? Is it God's will that people suffer? What did Jesus say?

Verse 3

I read somewhere this week that in earlier times, saliva was thought to have medicinal value – perhaps that was true in Jesus' time as well, I don't know about that. What the spittle bring to my own mind, though, is...the spit baths your mom gives you when you're a kid...know what I mean? You're out somewhere and your mom notices your face is dirty. You're not near a sink – what does she do? She spits on a kleenex, or the corner of her apron, and gives you the old spit bath, right?

What an astonishing thing for Jesus to do. Spit in the mud and put it on someone's face. It speaks of an intimacy that only gesture can express. Words just don't do it. Isn't that beautiful? Healing, wholeness, sight, coming to someone in such a simple, home-spun sort of way. Beautiful.

Alright...let's leave that stage now, and move to the middle one. A little closer to us. It's here that the neighbours are having a discussion about what happened. Try to put yourself in the scene. Alright – lights up on the middle stage:

read 8-12 What strikes you there?

Did you notice they talk ABOUT him but not TO him at first?

Can you sense the man's frustration? Picture this: you've been blind from birth. You've never seen the sun, a flower, colour, anything. Then someone gives you your sight.

What's the first thing you'd want to do?

This is just a wild guess but I'm thinking it's NOT standing around arguing about who it happened.

He must have been standing there blinking, looking around, eyes wide, like...like...like the first day of creation, which in fact for him, it sort of was.

Is he answering them only when he has to? Is he totally distracted by the sights around him and aching to get out of there to go and see his mom's face

If you were playing this character, how would you play it? Are you frustrated by the neighbours, or are they a minor annoyance in the wonder of it all, or what?

What place do distractors have when we have received the gift of Life? How do we deal with people like these neighbours? There are lots of people who, for whatever reason, try to put the focus on anything other than the miracle....anything but the wonder of life. You know folks like that. How do you handle them? How is the man reacting here? We don't know....I'd love to have been watching, wouldn't you? But let's leave them now...

and lights up on the centre stage. Get comfortable, because we're going to be there a while. The way John has structured this account, this is the centre of it. This is where he wants our attention. Why? Why does he make this one the centre stage? Ask yourself that as we read it again. Also, try again to put yourself in the position of the man born blind. If you were playing this role, how would you play it?

13-34 (point out how his answers keep getting shorter)

What's happening here? Missing the point. Completely. On purpose, it feels like, doesn't it? They don't get it. They don't SEE. They don't WANT to see. Here is a blind man, blind from birth, given sight. He's someone you know. What's your response to this miracle? This is unbelievable. What's their reaction about, really? What's going on for them? When people behave like that, what's at stake? Whatever it is it must be huge. It must be huge.

First, they don't argue with what's happened, rather they focus on the fact that it's on the Sabbath. One of the 39 works forbidden on the Sabbath was kneading, and Jesus they said had kneaded the clay to make the mud. They're looking for trouble, right?

THEN they start arguing about whether it happened at all, (a little late but apparently that didn't dawn on them) so they call his parents.

Now THIS scene is closest to us; the characters move almost into our own space. Right to the very lip of the stage. We can hear them breathing, smell their sweat, hear the swishing of their robes. This is the central scene of the whole episode. John has structured it that way, I don't know why but he's saying look folks – look and see. So – let's look.

18-23

What a position they must have been in – if he were YOUR son what would you have done? What we see here is fear and abuse of power and how it can really damage intimate relationships; his parents are prevented from running up to him, throwing their arms around him and crying with joy at this miracle. Did he feel betrayed by them? By the way they distanced themselves from him here? What damage was done to their relationship by this interrogation?

OR maybe the damage was done years ago when he was born.

HEY, that's a very good question: he clearly has 2 parents, why was he begging in the first place? Had they disowned him, believing him to be punishment from God for sins he or they had committed? Have they had a relationship with him at all, these many years?

Did he beg in the public square and then take what he earned home or was he totally on his own all this time? Did he welcome the sight of them? They of him? And is THIS the moment, the moment of seeing, when all that family history, as damaging as it's been, is washed away like so much mud in a pool of healing water, and nothing but the most important things remain? That they can see each other

real for the first time in their lives? Without the shame of imagined sin, without fear of judgement by the community? Is this a hallmark moment where all is made right?

Well, no actually. This is not that moment.

Sight HAS been restored, an act of creation has taken place to be sure, but creation is still unfolding, and all is not well in this family. We never get to know how it turns out for this man and his mom and dad, because John leaves us hanging and moves our attention to another stage. I want to say wait – what happened to them? And I think John might be saying “It’s up to you”

I think he’s saying “here’s a family broken by blindness of all kinds, and misunderstanding and the slimy muck of fear and judgement. This is YOUR family. You tell me what happens. It’s not over, it’s up to you.

OR is it this way – in saying “ask him” are they in fact giving him the dignity of recognizing him as the fully able person he’s always been? In those days not everyone was considered worthy to give witness. For example, in court women could not testify – they weren’t considered fully human in that way. I’m not sure about people with disabilities....but in saying “ask him” were they saying “he’s a real person able to speak for himself” was it their way of giving him the dignity he’d been denied? And in this way, the act of creation has already begun to spread...seeping through like cool rich mud between your toes, from Jesus to the man and then to them and their relationship with their son?

Never mind, we don’t know which it is, and John won’t let us linger. On we move. Lights up on the Pharisees and the man again. They ask him to tell them again how it happened. He’s mad now! And more than a little cheeky

24-34

Apparently he’s found not only his sight but his voice. He must have been beside himself – first, hoping in vain that they’d leave him alone and he could get on with the things he’d dreamed about his whole life. But then, figuring out that they weren’t going to let up, he decides to have some fun with them.

Finally, we move on one last time. Returning to the back stage once more – lights up on Jesus and the man. 35-41

John is holding out to us a vision. An awesome work of God, a miracle. Some see the miracle and cry out Praise God
others simply refuse to see, get caught up in nit picking and Biblical bullying and let the moment pass.

And John says who are you?

You followers of Jesus, yours is the 4th stage here.

You on your stage....the lights are up on you now.

What scene will we see played out on your stage?

The audience is all here....the Pharisees, the blind man, the neighbours, his parents, they’re all here, watching. Watching to see how we will play our part.

And one more is in the audience, and he too is watching.

But he’s doing something else too...

he’s bending down, mixing something together, and preparing for yet another creation.

Lights,

Action,

You're on.