Article

# Could a blind person have been a disciple of Jesus?

**What was Jesus' attitude to blindness? Why did he not include a blind person among his disciples? John Hull draws on his experience of becoming blind to challenge us to re-examine not only how we relate to blind people in church but also how we understand the Bible.**

by
John Hull

## Jesus and blindness

As a blind person myself, I have often asked the question: could a blind person have been a disciple of Jesus? All the actual disciples were sighted people. Of course, there must have been many women who have wondered whether Jesus might have called a woman to be amongst the Twelve, and it is true that they were all men. However, there were women amongst his closest followers, even if not amongst the inner group, but when it comes to blind disciples, it seems clear that there was a special reason why no blind person could possibly become one of his followers. Jesus would have restored the sight of the blind disciple, and then the new follower would no longer be blind. If there had been a blind disciple, it would have created huge embarrassment amongst the disciples, and people would have asked, as they asked concerning the death of Lazarus, 'Could not this man, who opened the eyes of so many, have restored the sight of this disciple of his?'

The fact is that, every time blind persons are mentioned in the Gospels, they are described as being outside the followers of Jesus, and it is not until their sight is granted that they become followers. The outstanding case is Blind Bartimaeus. He is described as a blind beggar, sitting by the roadside, who heard that Jesus and his disciples were about to pass by. The climax of the story says that, 'His sight was restored, and he followed Jesus in the way'.

## Blindness in the Gospels

The blind person in the Gospels is the symbol of the unbeliever, and the opening of the eyes is symbolic of the granting of faith. Blindness represents sin and unbelief; sight represents faith and discipleship. Indeed, many modern commentators say that we must not interpret these miracles of the restoration of sight as nature miracles, or as miracles of healing, but see them as parables or Christian sermons, in which conversion is described.

Then we come to the famous story in Mark about the blind man who was healed in two stages, first seeing people 'like trees walking' and, after the second healing touch, seeing 'all things clearly'. This can be read as a comment on the history of the faith of the Church. At first, in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry, the disciples had only a sort of half faith. They could not see Jesus clearly, that is, they did not have a clear understanding of his person and mission. It was only after the coming of the Holy Spirit that they had a clear faith, and the old blindness finally passed away. Understood in this way, the Gospel of Mark is the story of those days of semi-sight, when faith in Jesus as the Christ was only partly developed.

## The Church and blindness

Whatever theological motives may be expressed in these stories, whether they were literal healing miracles or allegories of the development of faith, they leave blind people today in much the same position. They are in the dark, from a Christian point of view, and since they could not become disciples of Jesus then, how do they stand today?

The truth is that this symbolic use of blindness as indicating a lack of faith still hangs over the Church today. We have it not only in the Gospels and, if it comes to that, in the rest of the Bible, but in our hymn books:
'Lord, I was blind, I could not see
The radiant beauty of thy face…'

If the hymn said, 'My eyes are closed, I could not see…' there would be no problem but, as long as we go on singing about blindness as suggesting lack of faith, we place a burden upon people who are literally blind.

This means that when a Christian today loses his or her sight, as well as the crisis of loss of sight, there is an additional problem. All one's life as a Christian, one has been soaked in the symbolism of blindness as sin. Now I am blind myself, so am I therefore plunged into

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sin? To this must be added that pressure which is often placed upon blind Christians: that they should accept miraculous healing, and if that does not happen, or if they refuse to go forward, they are somehow confirmed in their sinfulness. In many a literal-minded congregation, a blind Christian is a puzzle, a cause of offence.

## Implications

Where does all this leave us? It is clear that the Bible is not a politically correct document. Women theologians first drew attention to this, but now disabled people are joining in. Until this is realized, it will not be possible for the Church to offer equal opportunities and self-esteem to disabled people. It has become common to pour scorn upon political correctness, but that scorn is not shared by the people who are slandered and marginalized by the failure to use the language of liberty.

Does it matter that the Bible is not a politically correct document? Not really, for the Bible was to some extent incarnated into its own times and into the social assumptions of those who wrote it. However, within the pages of the Bible we also find a message of redemption and hope for all human beings. The implications of that message of deliverance, which were extended to slaves in the early nineteenth century in spite of the fact that the Bible condones slavery, must be extended to disabled people in spite of the fact that the Bible is harsh on them. In that way, we must allow the Bible to release us from the Bible, and to fulfil its message of fullness of life for all.

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**Editor's note**

This article reflects part of John Hull's Presidential Address to the NCEC Annual Assembly on 16 October 1999.

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