

Sunday, April 3: John 9:1-41

by [Matthew Myer Boulton](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

Three centuries ago in the village of Olney, England, a new parish priest came to town. The townsfolk flocked to hear him, fascinated with his vibrant, personal style of preaching and his checkered past as a slave trader.

In those days learned clergy frequently wrote original verses for congregational singing, and the priest at Olney wrote in a testimonial, plainspoken style, often referring obliquely to his own sordid story and remarkable conversion. Each week, he or an associate would present some new verses.

One of these compositions was titled "Faith's Review and Expectation." It was a plain and plaintive little poem, humble and heartfelt, and for its earliest audiences, it didn't stand out and was soon forgotten. But the song survived the priest, whose name was John Henry Newton. "Amazing Grace" crossed the Atlantic and became perhaps the most beloved hymn in the English-speaking world, not least among African-American communities.

For imagery and language, Newton drew on the parable of the prodigal son: "I once was lost, but now am found" (Luke 15:24) and on texts such as John 9, the story of Jesus' encounter with the man born blind: "Was blind, but now I see." John 9:1-41 is a story of a controversy, and it includes one of the most poignant verses in the whole gospel, a kind of window through which we can glimpse something of the pain and tension that troubled both John and his community.

The verse appears as a group of religious authorities are attempting to determine whether or not the alleged healing is bona fide; they call the man's parents as witnesses. The parents confirm the healing but plead ignorance about whether it had anything to do with Jesus.

"His parents said this," John explains, "because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue." This whole question of "being put out of the synagogue" haunts the Gospel of John and is a primary theme of this passage. The investigation ends with the formerly blind man being driven out—and in this sense,

literarily speaking, he stands for the Johannine community as a whole. He sees, and yet is rejected by those who don't.

Of course, as today's church conflicts demonstrate, this kind of polemic should immediately inspire skepticism about who actually rejected whom; no doubt it was a messy affair, as all such partings are. The point is that if we listen between and behind the lines of John's account, the echoes of emotional trauma—that is, of communal separation—are unmistakable. John is only too anxious to make his case, compile evidence and saddle "the Jews" with the blame.

It's worth noting, however, both in order to understand John more clearly and to avoid the crude anti-Judaism too often bred by Christian readings of texts like this one, that only a few pages earlier (last week's lection), Jesus declares that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Moreover, in John 9, the Jewish authorities are hardly of one mind: some find Jesus guilty of sin, but others believe in his works, asking, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?"

The fact is, in this passage and elsewhere, John is deeply ambivalent, even conflicted, when it comes to the Jewish authorities, "the Jews" and Judaism. Since the sting and swagger of separation are so palpable in his prose, Christian readers should interpret and appropriate his language with the utmost care and discretion. There is a clear temptation here for Christians clannishly to identify themselves with those who "see" and the Pharisees—and the Jews generally—with those who are blind.

Which brings us to Jesus, the good rabbi who consistently corrects his disciples' overzealous foolishness. At the opening of this passage, Jesus dismisses all fascination with blame when it comes to the man's blindness in the first place. Don't interpret the world primarily in terms of sin and just deserts, he says, but rather in terms of occasions for divine glory.

At the passage's close, Jesus describes his mission: "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Jesus comes to enlighten the ignorant, but also to confound those who arrogantly claim to be in the know—and this applies no less to you and me than it does to his supposed opponents.

The lection's last line pulls the rug out from under any triumphal Christian interpretation of this story: Jesus warns, "But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin

remains." The church's fundamental role, then, is not to declare, "We see!" over against Jews or anyone else—for when we do, "our sin remains." Instead, our role is to sing and pray as humbly and doxologically as God's amazing grace allows, harmonizing with former slave traders and former slaves alike: "Was blind, but now I see!"