



**A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 5 October 2025 by the
Reverend Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar.**

Nehemiah 5, 1-13; John 9

'One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' Jn.9,25

We came back from 10 days in France last week; it wasn't the best holiday ever: after a sunny first day, the sky turned grey, the mists rolled in, and the rain began – and continued, day after day, for the rest of our time there. We knew that the vineyards and rolling hills of Burgundy were there somewhere, beyond the pall of rainclouds – but we couldn't see them. And all that time, you in Wells were enjoying halcyon sunny days, and the clear, bright colours of Autumn. Lucky you; poor us.

If you can't see beyond what's immediately in front of you, life is pretty limited. In fact, there's not much point in being in a wonderful place, if your vision only extends to your immediate surroundings. You lose your true sense of where you are, your perspective becomes distorted.

Both our readings this afternoon say something about sight – or lack of it – and sight being restored; and about the choices we have to live in darkness or in light.

Our Old Testament reading from Nehemiah takes place when, under the leadership of the faithful and God-fearing Nehemiah as governor, the walls of Jerusalem are being re-built by those who have survived captivity in Babylon. The walls have fallen into disrepair after much bombardment, the project is huge, and demands a great deal of those doing the work. Despite opposition, the people give tithes of much money, supplies, and manpower to complete the walls in a remarkable 52 days; but the people have been exploited in the process, and feel oppressed; there is a great outcry because of lack of food, taxes that are having to be paid, and burdens of debt because of interest being demanded by Jewish officials and nobles who are lending money for the project.

Nehemiah is furious about this state of affairs within his community; he is provoked to speak out and denounce those who are unjustly making a profit out of their people. He confronts them. And their reaction? First stunned silence; and then their reply: 'We will restore everything, and demand nothing

more from them. We will do as you say.' They realised the error of their ways, and were willing to change; they had seen the light.

The story doesn't end there – the book is about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its community; it is about prayerful leadership, the need for communal faithfulness to God's law, and the struggle for a just and revitalized society amidst opposition, and it shows how a community can be restored when people work together, relying on God's protection and power to achieve what seems impossible – if people are willing to see things in new ways, and change.

For St. John, the writer of our New Testament reading, sight was never just about physical sight, but about spiritual sight: this whole chapter is set in the context of growing hostility between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. Who was he? they wanted to know, and where did he get his authority from? And Jesus sees this as a battle between light and darkness, having declared, in the previous chapter, 'I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' And here, in chapter 9, we have the restoration of sight to a blind man – and the controversy which follows. Many questions are asked: why was the man born blind? Is this really the blind man? Who is Jesus? How did he do this? And on the Sabbath too! All that the man who had been blind can go on saying is 'He put some mud on my eyes, then I washed, and now I see.' But the Jewish leaders are more blind to what is going on than ever: they, who should have had the spiritual knowledge and insight to understand refuse to allow their eyes to be opened, to see who Jesus is and what he is doing. The blind man has accepted and welcomed the healing power of Jesus, and his life has been transformed; as the story progresses, he becomes eloquent in his faith, and states that if Jesus were not from God, he couldn't have opened his eyes; but the Jewish leaders are at fault, because they have not acknowledged their true insight, and so remain in blindness. Like the person who witnesses a crime being committed, and knows that the right thing to do is to report it, but 'turns a blind eye', they have chosen darkness rather than light.

When people choose to turn their backs on darkness, they are changed; they 'change their minds' and see everything in a new light. But it may take great courage to allow that transformation to take place. Sometimes it's really hard to go in a new direction. We have to make ourselves vulnerable to turn towards that light and allow it to change us. Some people aren't even aware of the light – they are too preoccupied with getting on with their lives, day after day, 'same old, same old, as we say – nothing changes.

The poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (alluding to the story of Moses turning aside to take a look at the miraculous burning bush) wrote:

*'Earth's cammed with heaven,
and every common bush aflame with God;
but only those who see take off their shoes -
the rest sit round and gather blackberries.'*

Which would any of us be likely to do? Get on with gathering blackberries – or in a moment of awe, take off our shoes, because the light is shining - something amazing is going on?

The letter to Christians living in Ephesus – which may have been written by St. Paul, or by one of his disciples – has a verse in the first chapter which says it all:

'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.....may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance..., and what is the immeasurable power for us who believe....'

'With the eyes of your heart enlightened': what are we missing because the eyes of our heart are not enlightened? What might it mean to have 'the eyes of our heart enlightened'? Reading a challenging book? Or a different newspaper from the one we're used to? Using an alternative source of social media? Or really listening attentively to someone whose views or experiences are different from ours? Where is our spiritual blindness? What needs to be changed in us?

We see constantly in the news – but particularly, tragically so, in recent days - the consequences of living in a world where so many walk in darkness, and refuse the possibility that their minds might be changed, that their entrenched opinions might be anything different. And so fear breeds fear, and fear leads to hatred and violence. The roots of these patterns of behaviour go deep; cycles of hatred and violence are repeated throughout history. It's ironic that this reading from St. John's gospel sets 'The Jews' in opposition to the light of Christ; yet today we are offering our prayers of compassion for the Jewish people who have suffered so terribly because of the extremist views of others. The lines between good and evil are so often blurred in human nature; only in

the new creation, where sight is restored, shall we re-discover our common humanity.

There's no better example of a man who changed his mind, and whose sight, both physical and spiritual, was restored, than St Paul, who 'saw the light' on the road to Damascus, and I conclude with a few lines from the poem by John Betjeman describing St Paul's experience; and asking what a conversion experience, a change of mind, might be for any of us...?

*'Now is the time when we recall
The sharp conversion of St. Paul.
Converted! Turned the wrong way round -
A man who seemed till then quite sound.
Keen on religion – very keen -
No-one, it seemed, had ever been
So keen on persecuting those
Who said that Christ was God, and chose
To die for this absurd belief.
Then, in a sudden blinding light
Paul knew that Christ was God all right -
And very promptly lost his sight.....
Till Ananias came, and Paul
Received his sight, and more than all
His former strength, and was baptised....*

*What is conversion? Not at all
For me the experience of St. Paul,
No blinding light – a fitful glow
Is all the light of faith I know,
Which sometimes goes completely out
And leaves me plunging round in doubt.*

*What is conversion? Turning round
To gaze upon a love profound.
For some of us see Jesus plain,
And never once look back again;
And some of us have seen, and known
And turned and gone away alone;
But most of us turn slow to see
The figure hanging on a tree,
And stumble on, and blindly grope
Upheld by intermittent hope.
God grant before we die we all
May see the light, as did St. Paul.'*

Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar

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