None so blind as those who will not see

[25] “Why, that's very strange!” the man replied. “He healed my eyes, and yet you don’t know where he comes from? We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.”

34 “You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue.

When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

36 The man answered, “Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.”

37 “You have seen him,” Jesus said, “and he is speaking to you!”

38 “Yes, Lord, I believe!” the man said. And he worshipped Jesus.

39 Then Jesus told him, “I entered this world to render judgment – to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.”

Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, “Are you saying we’re blind?”

41 “If you were blind, you wouldn’t be guilty,” Jesus replied. “But you remain guilty because you claim you can see.” [NLT]

It is said of Nelson (the British admiral), that he was sent a message during the Battle of Copenhagen by the overly cautious commander of the British naval forces, to withdraw. [Naval orders were transmitted via a system of signal flags at that time.] When this order was brought to Nelson's attention, he lifted his telescope to his blind eye, and said “I really do not see the signal”.

Since that time we have the expression ‘to turn a blind eye to ...’ - but it has been something people have done for a lot longer. [It is claimed that husbands are very adept at this, when it comes to ‘not seeing’ things that need to be done.]

By turning a ‘blind eye’ to the signal, Nelson won the battle - so it can at times be a positive thing to ‘not see’ something. But it is not always a good thing to ignore, what we should - and can - see. There is a different aspect which has to do more with how we think - with our perceptions -, which results in us ‘not seeing’ something. When confronted by a matter that does not fit into one’s set way of thinking, it seems much easier to be ‘blind’ to this, than having to deal with the questions that are raised.

That is something we see in this story where the Pharisees are faced with an uncomfortable truth they would much rather ignore. It is the question of who this Jesus really is. What we see here is a classic case of

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Not being able to see something is something that can happen - e.g. not being able to solve a riddle, although everybody else has long done so. Sometimes we just can’t see a matter - but it is very different when we don’t want to see something.

The story of this 9th chapter in John tells the story of a man who had been born blind. Jesus had been asked whether this blindness was a result of the sin of the parents - or somehow whether the foetus had sinned before birth. This is just another illustration of how we can sometimes get caught up in a theological debate - while being blind to the needs of the people involved! It may sound as if we are debating some important spiritual truths, but all that it’s about is pushing somebody who suffers from a physical disability into a hole.

Jesus does not enter into the discussion, but makes it an opportunity for praising God, as he heals this man from his blindness. A lot of (“theological”)discussion follows - because this healing took place on the Sabbath. In this case Jesus did not just say, ‘You are healed’, but he made mud, by spitting on the ground, and then putting it on the eyes of the blind man. He then sent him to wash the mud of. This all amounted to work in the eyes of the law-observing people of the time - which made it a transgression of the Sabbath law.

Reading through this chapter is quite enlightening as to the way in which religious courts work. To begin with doubt is cast on the healing process. Then the parents of the formerly blind man are questioned, but they refuse to answer how he was healed and by whom, because “they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who had announced that anyone saying that Jesus was the Messiah would be expelled from
the synagogue.” (V. 22)
They then question the man, who had been healed once again, and put pressure on him, “Give glory to God by telling the truth, because we know that Jesus is a sinner.” (V. 24) In the course of the discussion this formerly blind person shows that he is the one who truly sees, when he points out, “We know that God doesn’t listen to sinners, but he is ready to hear those who worship him and do his will. Ever since the world began, no one has been able to open the eyes of someone born blind. If this man were not from God, he couldn’t have done it.”
If he had been speaking to reasonable people - to people who marvel at a miracle like this happening and who are open to hearing exactly what had occurred, he might have got a hearing. As it was, the end-result is that they say to him, “You were born a total sinner!” they answered. “Are you trying to teach us?” And they threw him out of the synagogue.
Excommunicating those who refuse to toe the official line - that has happened in the church of this Jesus over and over. When we refuse to face the facts, we too may push others out of our fellowship. But that does not exclude them from the fellowship with Jesus. We may not physically carry out an act of excluding somebody from membership in the church or congregation, but we have labels for people whose point of view we don’t want to see. Depending on our views, we may paint somebody as a fundamentalist or as a liberal. Since fundamentalists are detested by liberals and vice-versa, it is considered to be safe to be ‘blind’ to their views - no matter whether they are based on Scripture - after all they are the views of a total sinner!
But it is not a case of who is more right in their theological debates - it is not about scoring points (where we all seem to have our own scoring system, which automatically puts us ahead of anybody else). It is not about our private competition, of who is more in the right, but it is all about our relationship with Jesus that we must be concerned!
“Do you believe in the Son of Man?” - that is the question we too must answer. Believing in him is not so much a question of having all the right theological views - which we have simply taken over for generations from those who have preceded us. This question can’t simply be answered by reciting a creed - by just repeating what has been said before - as important as these things may be, but they can lead to being blind to the reality of our time.
Believing in the “Son of Man” means that we allow our views and perceptions to be challenged by him. It is about following where he leads - even if that should take us out of our comfort zone.
So it is not just a case of repeating the teachings that have been handed down, but of making sure that what we learn is in line with the teachings of Jesus, e.g. his teaching which calls on us to love one another by serving one another. Believing in him means that we can’t search out those paragraphs which makes it possible for me to stay as I am - although the clear evidence of Scripture is that my life must change.

Nelson may have had a good reason for turning a blind eye - but we need to read the Word of God with seeing eyes and a mind that is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Hearing what he says - and living by it, even if that is contrary to the society we live in.