



# Thinking Things Through

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## **SEEING IS BELIEVING**

There are many trials and tribulations which have to be faced and endured day and daily by men in this modern world in their pursuit of a quiet and stress-free life. One of these trials, which imparts a particularly exquisite form of mental torture, involves the modern shopping mall. To many women these edifices must appear a veritable Aladdin's cave of frocks, shoes and handbags where time is blissfully spent piecing together that perfect ensemble, or in pursuit of the ultimate discounted bargain. But to the species, known to anthropologists as Homo Erectus Blokus, who are meekly led to these citadels of mammon at weekends, they hold very few delights.

So there I was in a very large mall in L'derry recently and, having spent twenty minutes doing a circuit of Eason's to look at the latest books and magazines, there was nothing else to do but find somewhere to sit quietly and pass the time while Mrs S got on with some seriously focused shopping.

I sat amid all the pushing, scurrying and buying and selling, and became absorbed in clearing all the texts from my mobile. Then I looked up absent-mindedly to see that I was seated across from a branch of Vision Express, a shop that I've never had occasion to visit. Being at a loose end I studied their shop front and, to pass the time, I imagined that I was in the advertising business and that I had been commissioned to conduct a marketing campaign for them. I imagined that their "mission" (if indeed they do have one) might to be to help people to see more clearly. And the words of an excellent old Johnny Nash reggae song from way back in the day occurred to me:

"I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,  
I can see all obstacles in my way  
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind  
It's gonna be a bright, bright Sun-Shiny day."

I thought that this would be a perfect soundtrack to accompany the TV adverts which I would devise and which would have to match the claims written in the shop window which were promising "expert advice" and "total satisfaction guaranteed."

At this point I winced when hearing the loud crying and squealing of a toddler reverberating around the building. No doubt his parents were not giving him what he wanted when he wanted it, and it seemed to me that he was perhaps learning the painful lesson that we all have to learn: that satisfaction is rarely guaranteed in this life.

I imagined that, to some extent, the gospel's mission could be said to be similar to the one I had mentally framed for the shop; that is to help people to see more clearly. Blindness is used metaphorically throughout the Bible, and Isaiah's use of it is perhaps a classic and oft-repeated example:

“And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.” (Isaiah 6:9-10)

This use of the metaphor of blindness is then used again and again in the New Testament. For example, in John's gospel our Lord refers directly back to Isaiah's words:

“Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.” (John 12: 39-41)

And then in explaining why he uses parables in his preaching:

“Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” (Matt 13:13)

This message is reinforced again in the Acts of the Apostles when reference is made to how the Holy Ghost had spoken through Isaiah to their fathers: “Saying, Go unto this people and say, hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.” (Acts 29: 26-27)

This metaphor of spiritual blindness is used again in Matthew in reference to the Pharisees when they are denounced not only for being blind but for leading others in the same error: “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” (Matt 15:14)

And in the Gospel of John we learn that the same Pharisees carry a grave responsibility for misleading others about the nature of the truth:

“And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, if ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth.” (John 9:40-41)

It is made clear in John's gospel that Jesus is the light of the world that helps the blind to see: "Then spake Jesus unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12)

But interestingly, there is a corollary to this truth, which is that those who think that they are sighted can be blinded: "And Jesus said, For judgement I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind." (John 9:39)

So, the Bible has perhaps more in common with Vision Express than may at first seem to be the case. They both offer expert advice to those who can't see very well and they both offer a total guarantee of satisfaction. Incidentally, when we were walking away from the mall to go for lunch a young woman pressed a leaflet into our hands. It was from Specsavers and was offering "free sight tests!"

Epilogue.

The next day we were in Buncrana in County Donegal and, while out for a walk, found that a memorial has now been erected at the seashore, to John Newton. Indeed there are many tourist signs now erected around the Inishowen peninsula referring to it as "Amazing Grace Country."

The story goes that he was caught in a violent storm in the Atlantic Ocean in 1748 when, in great fear of drowning and aware of his sinful condition, he cried out to God for mercy and then found refuge in the calmer waters of Lough Swilly. He stepped ashore a changed man and this experience later inspired him to write Amazing Grace. The hymn testifies to the fact that the miracle of grace can and will allow somebody to see things as they really are:

"I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

And it contains an insight into how things will be in the future when not only will there be no more shopping malls or opticians, but there will be no more earth. And yet there will be a place for believers in heaven:

"The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God, who called me here below,  
Will be forever mine."