

Sunday 22nd March 2020 Lent 4 – Readings, Prayers and Reflections

If you are in church, take a moment to look at the Good Shepherd window and reflect on Psalm 23:

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;^[a]

³ he restores my soul.^[b]
He leads me in right paths^[c]
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,^[d]
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely^[e] goodness and mercy^[f] shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.^[g]

John 9: 1-41:

A Man Born Blind Receives Sight

9 As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ²His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.

⁴We^[a] must work the works of him who sent me^[b] while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” ⁶When he had said this,

he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes,

⁷saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and

washed and came back able to see. ⁸The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a

beggar began to ask, “Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?” ⁹Some were saying, “It is

he.” Others were saying, “No, but it is someone like him.” He kept saying, “I am the man.”

¹⁰But they kept asking him, “Then how were your eyes opened?” ¹¹He answered, “The man

called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then

I went and washed and received my sight.” ¹²They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do

not know.”

The Pharisees Investigate the Healing

¹³They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. ¹⁴Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. ¹⁵Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." ¹⁶Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. ¹⁷So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."

¹⁸The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight ¹⁹and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" ²⁰His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; ²¹but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

²²His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus^[e] to be the Messiah^[d] would be put out of the synagogue.

²³Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

²⁴So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." ²⁵He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." ²⁶They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" ²⁷He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" ²⁸Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. ²⁹We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." ³⁰The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. ³¹We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. ³²Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. ³³If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." ³⁴They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Spiritual Blindness

³⁵Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"^[e] ³⁶He answered, "And who is he, sir?^[f] Tell me, so that I may believe in him." ³⁷Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." ³⁸He said, "Lord,^[g] I believe." And he worshiped him. ³⁹Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

⁴⁰Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" ⁴¹Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Reflection

How quickly the world changes! This time last week children and young people were in education; those in work were carrying on with their usual routine; local businesses were open and thriving; and the shelves in the supermarket were well-stocked. In church life we were gearing up for a busy Holy Week and planning church activities just as we always do. I suspect the majority of us were already washing our hands but I doubt we had ever heard of the phrase ‘social distancing.’ Now it is a familiar part of our everyday language!

Welcome to life in the shadow of Covid-19. Like I said, how quickly the world changes. Or maybe ‘change’ isn’t the right word. Maybe ‘apocalyptic’ is a more appropriate word to describe what life feels like right now. An apocalypse, rightly defined, is an unveiling, a revelation of things previously unseen or unknown. So maybe the world hasn’t *changed* so much as it has been *exposed, uncovered* and *laid bare*. Maybe we were blind before, and the time has now come to see.

And what might we really see? That we are fragile. That we are interdependent and interconnected. That our daily choices can have consequences for other people. That unselfish love is inconvenient but costly and essential. Our Gospel story for this fourth week of Lent is about costly seeing.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus heals a man who has been blind since birth. Though this is a miracle story, the focus of John 9 is more on the religious community’s response, both to the man’s blindness and to his restored sight. And that response is telling.

Even before Jesus heals the blind man, the disciples assume that his blindness is his own fault. Jesus puts them right. There is *no* relationship between the man’s condition and his sinfulness. God does not make people sick in order to punish them for wrongdoing. In the story John tells, Jesus *sees* the blind man — a man whom no one else really sees. In the eyes of his peers, the man is contaminated. In his community the blind man barely registers. Which is why, when the man’s sight is restored by Jesus, his own people don’t recognise him. They don’t know *how* to see him without his disability. If they could they would have to acknowledge a common humanity, a bond, a kinship. And they can’t see that. When the man shows up at the Temple healed and whole, the community rallies to discredit him.

But why? *Why* does the community feel such an urgent need to silence the healed man? I wonder if it’s something to do with fear. A fear that overrides any compassion that they might feel. If the man’s blindness *isn’t* a punishment for sin, then what does that mean about how the world works? It means anyone might get sick, or suffer from a disability, or face pain and suffering for no discernible reason whatsoever. That would be a version of reality the religious people can’t control.

Not only does the community’s legalistic approach to faith prevent them from seeing the healed man; it also prevents them from seeing God’s love and power at work in their midst. For me, the saddest part of this story is that no one in the story rejoices when the man is healed. No one (not even his parents) expresses joy, or

gratitude, or awe. Instead, the community responds with contempt because its need to preserve its own sense of righteousness blinds it to being able to celebrate new life.

What does that tell us about what it means ‘to see’? I wonder if it suggests that qualities such as vulnerability, softness, curiosity, and openness are essential to real seeing. Most of the people who encounter Jesus are too busy seeing what they want to see that they can’t notice what the blind man, free of all such filters, discerns by the end of the story. He alone sees Jesus and calls him, “Lord.”

This is one of the rare and beautiful moments in the Gospels when Jesus himself is truly *seen*. The blind man sees Jesus as wholly and purely as Jesus sees him; the recognition in this story is mutual. Because the healed man has no preconceptions, he is open and so he is able to see God as God is.

Whether we want to or not over the coming weeks, we will face a choice — the choice to see or to turn away.

During these hard days, our faith may grow or shrink. We will be challenged to focus and see what really matters as we journey towards the events of Holy Week and the cross and the new life that is offered there.

Will we be soft and supple and flexible in the ways we extend love across distances, or will we hunker down in fear and suspicion? Will we dare to be the Church in new ways, even as we practice self-isolation and social distancing — or will we forget that we are one body, interdependent and incomplete without each other? Will we have eyes to see God in our neighbours, regardless of whether they are sick or healthy, young or old, protected or vulnerable? Will we be brave enough to look our own vulnerability in the eye, and trust that God is with us? Or will we yield to panic and despair?

I am in awe of the trust the healed man has in Jesus by the end of this week’s Gospel story — a trust deep enough to enable him to bear honest, radical witness to his experience, even at the continued risk of insult and rejection from his religious community. In shedding his identity as ‘the man blind from birth’, he becomes a disciple and a follower of Christ.

As we continue to journey through Lent may we:

confess our blindness and receive sight.

praise the one who kneels in the dirt and gets his hands dirty in order to heal us.

soften and prepare the ground we stand on, so that when new life appears in whatever surprising guise God chooses, we will celebrate it and share the good news with others too.

Stay safe and go well,

May God be with us.

A Prayer for Mothering Sunday:

We thank you God, for those mothers who have loved and made sacrifices for their children. Jesus saw that love in his own mother.

But this day can be very difficult for some people because they cannot celebrate as other people do.

So, we remember in our prayers those who never knew their mothers and feel that loss keenly.

We pray for those whose mothers have died, especially if that is a recent event.

We pray for those whose mothers were not loving or kind.

We pray for those whose mothers suffer illness or abuse.

We pray for mothers who feel unable to cope.

We pray for all who have never experienced a mother's love and who don't understand what this day is about.

We pray for mothers who have lost their children and for those who have longed to become a mother but have not been able to fulfil that longing.

We pray for all those who have taken on the role of a mother for a parentless child.

Caring God, hold in your love all those for whom this is a difficult day.

Loving God, be with those families who can celebrate and share in the joy of this day.
Amen.

A Prayer for our current situation regarding the coronavirus:

Jesus Christ, you travelled through towns and villages "curing every disease and illness." At your command, the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the coronavirus, that we may experience your healing love.

We remember those who have died from the virus.

Heal those who are sick with the virus. May they regain their strength and health through quality medical care.

Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair. May they know your peace.

Be with those who are unable to protect themselves - the homeless, the refugee and those who are shown little care.

Heal us from our fear which prevents nations from working together and neighbours from helping one another.

Heal us from our pride, which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders.

Be with the doctors, nurses, researchers and all medical professionals who seek to heal and help those affected and who put themselves at risk in the process. May they know your protection and peace.

Be with the leaders of all nations. Give them the foresight to act with charity and true concern for the well-being of the people they are meant to serve. Give them the

wisdom to invest in long-term solutions that will help prepare for or prevent future outbreaks. May they know your peace, as they work together to achieve it on earth.

Whether we are home or abroad, surrounded by many people suffering from this illness or only a few, Lord Jesus Christ, stay with us as we endure and mourn, persist and prepare. In place of our anxiety, give us your peace.

Jesus Christ, heal us.

We remember before you others who we know are in need at this time.....

We offer all of our prayers and the meditations of our hearts in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour,

Amen.

A prayer and blessing for the coming week:

Loving God, go with us as we journey into this coming week.
Give us strength to sustain us for all that will be asked of us,
courage to face each day with calm,
and a peace that drives out fear.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon us,
upon all those we know and love,
upon our nation and the world,
now and forevermore. Amen.

