

SUNDAY DEVOTIONS
22 MARCH 2020 - LENT 4

OPENING PRAYER

God of mercy and God of joy - we praise you for your faithfulness and your love. Open our eyes to the marvellous evidence of your presence among us. Open too our ears to the one who calls us by name and seeks to lead us in the path of righteousness. Indeed, O Lord, link us together in a true and abiding fellowship of sharing and caring and of prayer and of devotion - especially in this trying time. Work your will within us and through us that we may bring glory and praise and honour to that name which is above every name, both in this hour and in all the hours to come. We ask it through Christ Jesus, our brother and our Lord. Amen.

PSALM 23

LORD God, divine shepherd;
in the days ahead, just as it has been all my life,
I shall not want for anything.
You will rest me in rich pasture
and lead me beside calm waters.
You will bring my inner being back where it belongs,
and lead me along the right paths,
for the sake of your name.
Even when things seem at their darkest,
sensing your presence, I fear nothing;
you are sure of the way ahead, and you protect me.
Indeed, in spite of the adversity surrounding me
you continue to provide abundantly for my well-being;
anointing me with your hospitality
and pouring out blessing upon blessing.
Surely good and lovingkindness will pursue me all my days,
I will return, and you, O LORD,
shall be my dwelling-place for days without end.

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Let us worship God.

PRAYER OF ADORATION

One thing we know, Listener to our hearts:
you are the One who sends us on journeys
and waits for us at the final destination.

One thing we know, Healer of our lives:
when we find ourselves in valleys veiled in shadows,
you are walking alongside us even though we may never notice.

One thing we know, Comforter of our souls:
when we are weakened by the burdens of our lives,
you come to us, to rest your strengthening peace upon us.

One thing we know, God in Community, Holy in One:
once we could not see you in every moment,
but now our eyes are opened wide. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Gracious God, in a world filled with fear and panic,
forgive us when we would rather shut our eyes
than to see things as they really are.
Grant us the courage to face the reality of our world,
and give us the strength to bring your light
to those who walk in darkness.
Forgive us when we do not trust you enough
to open our eyes to the possibilities before us.
Forgive us for our failings,
and uphold us in love
In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

May I encourage you to be people of prayer.
For the good news is that God's power for life will not be overridden
or resisted or defeated.
Rejoice and be glad,
for we are renewed with love and made whole with grace.
We are forgiven
Thanks be to God.

BIBLE READINGS

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9:1-41

SERMON *It's not what you see*

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH: LENT

I believe in God the Creator,
who made me and all things,
who set me on my path in this world.

I believe in God the Saviour,
who is one with the Creator,
who rescued me and all creation
from the depredations of our violations
against God and creation.
This man, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ,
walked a path through this world,
taking on human form having been born of a woman
through the power of the Holy Spirit.
He lived and worked in this world among people just like me.
He walked God's path to death on a cross,
and rose from the dead to open our pathway to eternal life.

I believe in God the Holy Spirit, my counselor and guide,
who is one with the Creator and the Christ,
who through the body and blood of Jesus
brings me into communion with all people, past, present and future;
who calls me to walk a sacred way of life through this world,
caring for creation and the people I meet on the way,
loving them, helping them, welcoming them without prejudice,
being God's hands and feet in the world.

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Compassionate Lord, do not reject us for our unbelief and bad behavior. We confess we are full of pride and we forget to offer you our best. Sanctify us and give us hope in your promises of new life. Choose us and use us according to your will. (1 Sam 16: 1-13)

Great Shepherd, guide us and lead us to share from the abundance you have provided. Remind us of our gifts so that we might use them to bring others into the fold. In dark times, lift us into your light so that we might pass that comfort on to each one we meet. (Ps 23)

Shine on us, Lord God. Bring your light into our lives to reveal our brokenness and restore us to the wholeness only you can give. Look with mercy on those who feel they have no hope: victims of abuse, violence, neglect, war, poverty and shame. Bring them hope. (Eph 5: 8-14)

Healing Lord, you are the light of the world. You bring sight to the blind, health to the un-well. Have compassion, now, on these friends and loved ones who need your healing touch:

This morning, we pray especially for... *(insert names and situations here)*

Announce your love for all through your strong embrace, O Lord, as into your hands we commit all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Lord, Jesus, let us go now to live as children of the light.
to seek what is pleasing to the Lord,
in spite of the darkness around us,
and to commit ourselves to the works of God who sends us.
Amen.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SEE

Lent 4 Year A

1 Sam. 16:1-13; Ps. 23; Eph. 5:8-14; Jn. 9:1-41

22/03/2020

In almost every situation we are faced with, there is always more going on than meets the eye—more than what we can see. Whether it's at a cosmic or molecular level, we just can't always see what's really going on. Every article we read in the newspapers, every political communication we hear, every action that we don't understand by someone, every conversation we have with someone who disagrees with our point of view (gosh, that never happens). There is almost always something else going on—something that we do not or cannot see.

In both our readings this morning from John's gospel and 1 Samuel, there is more going on that meets the eye—eye or eyes being the appropriate word in this context—and what the eyes see, or don't see.

There are two kinds of blindness in the world today. Indeed these two kinds of blindness have always been in existence, almost from the creation of the world. There is, of course, physical blindness, the blindness that we find in our reading from John's account of the gospel, this morning—the inability to see clearly, or indeed to be able to see at all. We all understand that concept. We all know or have met people who are blind or have great difficulty in seeing.

And then there's the spiritual blindness that is also prominent in our John reading as well as in our reading from 1 Samuel this morning, as God sends the prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint David as the next king of Israel. Even the apostle Paul in the reading from his letter to the Ephesians, this morning, contrasts the images of those who live in darkness and those who live in the light—equating those who are spiritually blind with those who are physically blind. These images of seeing and blindness and this connection with our physical and spiritual lives, can be found all throughout the Scriptures.

In all of these readings, we discover one of the great truths of the Bible, that says: It's not *what* you see, that matters so much but *how* you see. It's whether you look at people, things and situations using the eyes of the world, the eyes of our sinful nature, the eyes that only look on the outward appearance—or whether you see things with eyes that look beneath the surface, with eyes that look on the heart, with eyes that see things as God sees them.

In our reading from John's gospel, this morning, we hear once again that wonderful story of the healing of the man who was born blind. I am sure that you are all familiar with the story—and I've probably preached on it a time or two. So, why should today be any different? But don't worry, I'm not going to stay there. We recall the enquiry from the

disciples as to the reason for this man's blindness. Obviously it's got to be someone's fault—either his or his parents. “Which one is it, Lord?” Neither, says Jesus. “He is blind so that you might see a miracle.” Now, I'm not too sure that that's a kind of reason that would go down terribly well with most blind people, but there you have it. Jesus says:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.

The story of the healing of the man born blind is a beautiful story of Jesus' compassion for this effectively disabled man—healing him from his affliction, restoring him to his family and society and enabling him to move on in life, giving glory to God for his healing. At the end of the encounter, when the man who had been healed of his blindness finds Jesus—or more accurately, Jesus finds him, we hear Jesus say:

“I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” ⁴⁰*Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?”* ⁴¹*Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”*

I have always found it interesting that the Pharisees knew exactly what and who Jesus was talking about and to in this passage. And here, once again, we see this connection between spiritual blindness and physical blindness. The one demonstrating the other. In one sense the man who had been born blind, was a prop for Jesus' teaching—as were many of Jesus' miracles. But I think it would be unjust to see it only in that way. Obviously, Jesus *did* care about the man, showed him compassion and healed him from his affliction, as he did with many others. Nevertheless, true life situations are often used in the Scriptures to draw out important spiritual realities.

Now, let's now move back a few years—around 1000 (or so) to be a little more precise—to the time when Saul was king over Israel. Saul, as you will no doubt remember, looked every bit the part of a great warrior and leader. That is, after all, how he became king. He looked the part. He was a big, tough, hunk of a man, who exuded power and authority—standing a head taller than any other candidate. But that's not always a good indicator of what a person is like on the inside.

To cut a long story short, in the end, Saul had disobeyed God—in effect placing himself in God's authoritative position. And God, as you might expect, was not happy with this. It reminds me of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, who said very early on in the book: “My good opinion once lost, is lost forever.” Well Darcy did, in fact, change his position on that—particularly in relation to a certain Miss Elizabeth Bennett. Saul, however, was not so lucky.

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel."

As far as God was concerned, it was a done deal—Saul was out—and now Samuel was charged with anointing a new King over Israel. And as we heard, things had to be done rather surreptitiously—lest Saul discovers what Samuel's up to and prevents it—probably in some form of violent manner. In what you might call, an end of life experience.

So God, ever the pragmatist, tells Samuel to take a heifer with him and say, if anyone had the notion to ask, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Samuel was then to invite Jesse along to the sacrifice, and as God tells him: "I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Easy peasey. What could possibly go wrong?

So, Samuel heads off to Jesse's place in the country. Once there, Samuel gets Jesse to line up all his sons, ready for God to put the word on him and tell him which of his sons he is to anoint. The first son, Eliab, looked promising—but no. We read:

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." ⁷ But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

And so it went all the way down the line. One by one, each of Jesse's sons who were presented to Samuel were rejected. By the end, Samuel is starting to get a little worried. "What am I missing?", he might have said to himself. "Um! You don't, by any chance, happen to have another son...somewhere...do you?" "Well as a matter of fact I do," says Jesse, "but he's the youngest and he's out in the field, looking after the sheep." "I know you said to get all my sons together, but David? I mean, have you seen him—scrawny little feller he is. He can't possibly be the one you're looking for. There must be some mistake." *(my interpretation of the conversation)*

Now, I don't know if you have ever noticed, but God doesn't tend to make too many mistakes. He's kind of pretty well spot on—most of the time. And so, David is brought in, and as you guessed, declared by God as the new king, anointed by Samuel who leaves soon after, hightailing it back to Rama, and the rest, as they say, is history.

So, here we have it, both in John and in 1 Samuel—the necessity to open our blind eyes to see what God wants us to see—to see *how* God sees and not as we would naturally look at things. Remember, it's *not* what you see that counts, it's how you see. In John, the blind man was healed and became an object lesson for the Pharisees, who were spiritually blind to God's work among the people. In 1 Samuel, we are taught not to look on outward

appearance, but on what's inside a person—on the heart. To look at people and things the way God looks at them.

So, how do you see things in this world? How is your spiritual eyesight? Do you know how to evaluate what comes through your eyes so that you can embrace far more important spiritual realities—the things that sometimes lie just below the surfaces of life (past which most people can't see and do not even try to see)? How do you look beyond the surface appearance in order to get right to the heart?

All through history this has probably been a valid question and, for Christians, it's a constant struggle—it really is. But rarely in history have we been so trained to stick to the surfaces of life as in our 21st century world.

We are taught to be enamoured by the beautiful, the spectacular, the bling. Videos, photographs, and talking heads on TV train us to look no further than the outward appearances of life and of people. In fact, at times there seems to be a conspiracy to keep us from looking too deeply into what may be inside a person's heart. How a person looks or acts may well be important, but unless we understand what's in their heart—in their innermost being—we are only getting a part of the picture.

Lent is a time that reminds us that the deepest and dearest truths of the universe require a “spiritual” vision that looks past outward appearances and even past apparent contradictions. We have to believe that a mild-mannered carpenter's son from the backwaters of the Roman Empire was and is the Son of God in human skin. We have to believe that humility equals the truest form of strength. We have to believe that the dead-end of a public execution is secretly the gateway to eternal life and that an instrument of violent death—the cross—is now properly seen as a symbol of profound hope.

You will not come to see or understand any of that if you focus only on outward appearances. Our readings from John and 1 Samuel makes this very clear. However, even when we try to focus on the internal, it's still tough to get past the external. Even so, Lent is a time to adjust our spiritual eyesight, to visit the heavenly optometrist (as it were) and make sure our corrective lenses are still adequate to help us look past the outward appearance of people and life in general, and see and recognise the true Light of the World—Jesus Christ.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.