

THE SERMON - Lent 4 – March 19th, 2023.

Readings: 1 Samuel 16: 1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5: 8-14; John 9: 1-41.

The themes which run through today's readings are "light", "seeing", "perception" and "understanding", but also, not falling for our preconceived ideas!

It is amazing what we take for granted in life ... particularly our eyesight. My guess is that few of us here have perfect vision, but on the other hand, none of us are actually blind. We can see, but how often do we really stop to look, to pay attention to the little things?

Do we often see what we expect to see, or can we discern, at a deeper level, and really see what we are looking at?

For example, what do you look for in a leader? What sort of person would you choose?

Well, this is the situation which Samuel is faced with in our first reading.

The story begins with Samuel grieving over the failure of the current king, Saul, to live up to expectations, and he is called to go and seek out a new king from one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. Jesse's sons are tall and strong and good looking, but continually he finds himself confronted by a God who kept telling him again and again, "Not this one." Like all seekers, Samuel found himself being asked by God to look differently, to see the world in a new way. It is not until Jesse's youngest son is finally presented that God says; "Yes, this is the one!" Who would have picked the youngest to be the leader, the king?

Our psalm this morning is possibly the most famous of all psalms. Psalm 23.

"The Lord is my shepherd ..."

As I travelled with this psalm through the week, I recognised that like many things which are familiar, so familiar, we forget to pay attention to what it is really saying to us, or what it might be saying to us NOW!

For many, this psalm is one of deep comfort. Many a time I have read it at the bed of someone who is dying, bringing great calm and peace to that person.

It is a psalm which talks about having the faith and trust in God to lead us through troubled times. A psalm we can hold on to in when everything around us is confusing and difficult.

In the Epistle today, the writer, possibly Paul or one of his disciples, talks about being called out of darkness by the light of Christ. We are encouraged to therefore live as children of the light – living lives which are good and right and true.

There is a responsibility in claiming to be a child of the light, a follower of Christ, and that is to live lives which when exposed to the light are shown to be honest, compassionate and hope-filled.

Today's Gospel is, in its own way, fascinating. We see the story from many sides, and in some depth. There is even humour in some of the formerly blind man's comments to the Pharisees! The teaching Jesus gives is all about sight, both physical and spiritual.

At the centre is the man born blind, whose restoration to sight reveals the blindness all around him, from his neighbours and family to the religious authorities and even Jesus' own disciples. The disciples are caught up, like everyone else, in the perspectives of their own day. To them and to their contemporaries, blindness, like all physical disorders, must indicate some sort of sin.

The religious authorities could not see the power of the blind man's experience because they were too focused on the proper keeping of their religious tradition. For them, the only thing that mattered was that Jesus had violated the Sabbath by working a miracle of healing.

For the blind man's neighbours, his healing meant the rupture of a social order they had grown accustomed to. They were, in fact, so comfortable with it, they could hardly recognize him after his sight was restored.

In our readings today, what might Jesus be trying to tell us? What do we hear when we "listen to him"? What might happen if we ask Jesus to heal our spiritual blindness?

We, as enlightened people of the 21st century, might be tempted to think that we know better. But do we? Despite our medical advances and a culture that prides itself on its "tolerance" and sensitivity, we, just like the neighbours and the religious authorities, have our own limitations of sight. Are we not caught in the same conventions that Samuel found himself in as he reviewed Jesse's children? Samuel's first inclination was to see a potential new king in the tallest and strongest of the boys.

This Sunday, our Lenten journey reaches a place where we are called to acknowledge our own blindness and seek Jesus' healing touch. But this kind of seeking is risky, because it has the possibility of turning our neatly ordered worlds upside-down. The man born blind in today's Gospel finds himself in unusual and unexpected places. Before, he was a beggar, scraping out a living on the fringes of society. After encountering Christ, he becomes unrecognizable to his neighbours and finds himself witnessing about the power of God in the court of the religious authorities.

So, what is God calling us to do? Do we dare risk the journey of the man born blind? Do we dare venture out like Samuel did to find something new in the unlikeliest of places? Christ is, in fact, asking us to put aside our old ways of seeing and to see, instead, through the eyes of God. And what we will see and how we will see remains a mystery until we actually dare to try - until we put our own blindness completely into the healing hands of the one who says, "I am the light of the world."

We might see leadership emerging in strange and unexpected places. We might hear God speaking through the voices of those who have been residing on the margins of our communities. We might find new ways of relating to God and each other - ways that we had not imagined before, and ways that might bring new life to our ministries, to our communities, and to the peoples around us.

I pray that we can see passed our preconceived ideas of what it means to be church and find our blindness removed, so we can see, understand and value what we have and seek to find ever new ways of being church and having a relationship with our God. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
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Sermon by Richard Helmer as posted in Worship that Works for Lent 4, 2002.