

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 22nd March 2020
4th Sunday of Lent
Mothering Sunday

Collect

God of love,
passionate and strong,
tender and careful:
watch over us and hold us
all the days of our life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Readings

Ephesians 5:8-14

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light - for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

John 9

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He 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." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then 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." Some 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. So 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."

The 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 and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but 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." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

So 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." He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He 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?" Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

Sermon

Darkness and light; blindness and sight. These feel like powerful themes for our times. Today is Mothering Sunday, and I rather imagine that none of us will be spending it in quite the way we might have expected. There is always a poignancy about Mothering Sunday. While for many it is a day to give thanks for special loved ones and give them a bit of well-deserved pampering, it is inevitably a challenging day for others. This ambiguity feeds into our own uncertainties as we try to live out what it means to be church at a time when we are unable to meet together in person for worship.

Darkness and light; blindness and sight. Over these past few weeks, it feels as though our foundations have been rocked. Things that we have taken for granted in the past can no longer be taken for granted, and the situation is changing so rapidly that what seems certain at one moment has been altered the next. If we thought we were the enlightened ones, those who understood the world and the way it functions, we might have experienced the darkness descending. And if we thought we were good at planning for every eventuality, we may be feeling like we were a lot less clear sighted than we thought.

This morning's gospel explores those images of darkness and light; of blindness and sight; and challenges our expectations. Challenges us to see things differently. And gives us tremendous hope in our current situation.

It's a wonderful story, isn't it, with its beautiful cast of characters. The man blind from birth, whose name we never know; his parents; the Jews; their leaders the Pharisees; the disciples; and of course Jesus. As the story unfolds, we discover the worldview of each of the characters, or groups of characters, and see how their understanding and expectations are shifted.

Our first encounter is with the disciples. They think they understand how the world works: if someone is unwell or disabled in any way, there must have been sin involved. And so they ask Jesus whether the sinner was the man himself, or his parents. You'd think by now they'd know better. After all, they've been with Jesus for some time. They've heard him preach and teach. They've watched him perform miracles. They know that his message is one of light, life and forgiveness. And yet they struggle to escape from the worldview they were brought up with. I wonder if you can identify with that? With thinking you've let go of unhelpful attitudes and ideas that were formed in your childhood, only to find that they keep popping up when you least expect it. And Jesus remains calm and reassuring. He repeats the message that he has no doubt been saying from the beginning. That neither the man nor his parents sinned. That God's works, the works of light, will be revealed through him.

We probably aren't surprised by the Pharisees. They are almost pantomime characters and we know that we need to "boo" when they come on stage. They are the religious leaders and Jesus's presence feels like a serious threat to their position, so they set out their stall.

Jesus cannot be from God because he does not observe the Sabbath. If there's been a miracle, it can't be anything to do with Jesus.

It's interesting, isn't it, that while the Pharisees stand firm about Jesus, preserving their position, trying to maintain their status, the people they are leading, the Jewish people, become divided. Naturally they want to believe their leaders, to be guided by them, to agree with what they say. And yet the evidence shows them something different. And so they test the evidence, approaching the man's parents to find out whether the man really was born blind. And when the parents will answer only half of their question, they approach the man himself.

Light and darkness; blindness and sight. The Pharisees should be enlightened. They should be able to see clearly and guide the Jewish people, yet while they seek to preserve their own status and position, they plunge their people into darkness and confusion. They don't know who or what to believe. Should they trust what they have seen with their own eyes, or should they listen to their leaders?

I wonder whether we can recognise such times of confusion in our own lives when we have struggled to find the right path. When we have been offered conflicting advice. When we haven't known whether to trust our instincts, or what we are being told, or something else entirely. The Jewish people and their leaders are supposed to be people of light, and yet in this story they are shrouded in darkness. They are the ones who can see, and yet they appear to be blind to what is in front of their eyes.

The story of the blind man's parents starts to help us to see how we might move from darkness to light. They have probably spent a lifetime on the edges of exclusion and are asked to testify that the man was born blind. They do this, but when asked how he is now able to see, they defer to their son. They have devoted their lives to bringing up their child and enabling him to see the truth, and now they are prepared to recognise that they have something to learn from him. He has had the experience, and he must speak for himself. They, perhaps, will be drawn back towards the light through him. On Mothering Sunday it's helpful to remember the two way relationship between parents and children. The ways in which we nurture one another and the roles work both ways.

And it is the blind man himself from whom we too learn so much. What I like most about this story is his refusal to make interpretations. He stands up for what he knows. He speaks the truth. And he also acknowledges what he does not know.

Right from the start, when asked how his eyes were opened, he simply recounts what Jesus did. It's an extraordinary testimony, and is irrefutable because he is simply stating what happened. The only interpretation he offers is when he is asked what he would say about Jesus, and he replies that he is a prophet: someone who foretells; who is connected to God. As the Jewish people seek to make sense of the situation, he simply repeats his story. He states what he knows and allows what has happened to speak for itself. And that is where

we see the enlightenment. It is as though, unencumbered by having a position to uphold, or other people to please, he allows himself to see the truth. He lets Jesus in, and in doing so, is enlightened.

We are living through uncertain times, of that there is no doubt. And the call to each one of us is to see as clearly as we can in these difficult circumstances; to seek the light; and indeed to be that light wherever we can. Every time I see someone bringing a donation for the Foodbank at a time when a lot of people are stocking up for themselves, I am reminded of the light. Of where generosity overcomes greed. We will all find ways in these coming weeks to connect with one another to prevent loneliness and isolation, and each time we do so, we are ensuring that darkness does not overcome the light.

Whenever we come together in worship, we recognise that the church is the Body of Christ. In this morning's gospel reading Jesus says: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Whether or not we meet in person, we remain the Body of Christ. So let's make sure that the light of Christ keeps shining brightly.

Amen