

The Uniting Church in Australia
Lindfield Uniting Church



Lent 4



image

Jesus Heals the Blind Man
Religious zeal criticises Jesus for his freedom

March 22, 2020

ORDER OF SERVICE

GREETING

A warm greeting to all readers.

LENTEN SPIRITUALITY

Welcome to a season of self-examination.

This is a time to ponder the depth
of God's transforming love into the world.

Lenten spirituality invites a transformative journey.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE FIRST PEOPLES

We acknowledge the Ku-ring-gai and Terramerragal
peoples, the traditional custodians on whose land
this church was built. We commit ourselves to actively
work alongside Aboriginal people
for reconciliation and justice.

HYMN *O love of God* **139**

1 O love of God, how strong and true,
eternal and yet ever new,
uncomprehended and unbought,
beyond all knowledge and all thought!

2 O wide-embracing, wondrous love,
We read you in the sky above,
we read you in the earth below,
in seas that swell and streams that flow.

3 We read you best in him who came
to bear for us the cross of shame,
sent by the Father from on high,
our life to live, our death to die.

4 We read your power to bless and save
ev'n in the darkness of the grave;
still more in resurrection light
we read the fullness of your might.

5 O love of God, our shield and stay
through all the perils of our way;
eternal love, in you we rest,
for ever safe, for ever blest.

OPENING PRAYER *PSALM 23*

You, God, are my best Friend,
I shall never be helpless.

***You make me rest in green places,
you lead me beside tranquil pools.***

You revive my spirits,
***leading me along good paths
where your name is honoured.***

Even when I must walk
through darkness and grief,
I will not be afraid.

For you are with me;
your grace and truth comfort me.

You have set a table for me
in the presence of my doubts and fears.
***You release the tensions of life,
my cup is full and running over.***

Certainly goodness and mercy
shall follow me every day of my life,
***and I shall live abundantly in your home
when calendars and clocks are no more.***

B D Prewer 2001

THE PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you!
And also with you!

HYMN *Christ is the world's true light* **246**

1 Christ is the world's true light,
its captain of salvation,
the day-star clear and bright,
desire of every nation;
new life, new hope awakes
for all who own his sway:
freedom her bondage breaks,
and night is turned to day.

2 In Christ all races meet,
their ancient feuds forgetting,
the whole round world complete,
from sunrise to its setting:
when Christ is throned as Lord,
all shall forsake their fear,
to ploughshare beat the sword,
to pruning-hook the spear.

3 One Lord, in one great name
unite us all who own you;
cast out our pride and shame
that hinder to enthrone you;
the world has waited long,
has travailed long in pain;
to heal its ancient wrong,
come, Prince of Peace, and reign.

PRAYER

Today we will hear the story
of the healing of human blindness
and the intransigent blindness of the Pharisees.

If we begin to judge them
feeling that we are not like them

open our eyes to see that there are times
when we close our eyes
rather than seeing clearly
who we are and what is around us.

When self-centredness blinds us
to the wreckage of human challenges
and stubbornness blinds us
to the troubles of our brothers and sisters;
Jesus, Light of the world, lighten our darkness.

When we turn away
so we cannot see the inequalities
where we have so much while others live in poverty,
Jesus Light of the world, lighten our darkness.

We see the generosity of your grace and mercy!
***As you touched the eyes of the man born blind
touch us with you love that we empower others.***

(Adapted: Source: Church of Scotland Starters for Sunday)

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

In God, Source of Life:
our deaths are not the final word,
our moments of crisis are part of eternal possibility,
and our weakness is taken up into the courage of God.

As followers of Jesus of the Way:
our humanness is touched with divine life,
our tears are mingled with longing love,
and our solidarity with those who suffer
is joined by divine presence.

In the Spirit of Creativity:
there are no boundaries on the dream,
there is no end to hope,
and we will never live beyond the cherishing of God.

(Source: DMcRae-McMahon, adapted)

GOSPEL READING John 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 33-34

Jesus went along and saw a man blind from birth.

Jesus spat on the ground, made mud with the spittle,

put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said,

‘Go and wash in the pool of Siloam’.

So the blind man went off and washed,

and came away with sight restored.

The neighbours and people who earlier had seen him begging, said,

‘Isn’t this the one who used to sit and beg?’

Some said, ‘Yes, it is the same one.’

Others said, ‘No, he only looks like him.’

The man said, ‘I am the one...’

They brought the man who had been blind to the Pharisees.

It had been a sabbath day when Jesus made the paste

and opened the man’s eyes,

so when the Pharisees asked how he had come to see, he said,

‘The one they call Jesus put paste on my eyes,

and I washed and I can see.’

Then some of the Pharisees said,

‘This Jesus can not be from God: he does not keep the sabbath.’

Others said, ‘How could a sinner produce signs like this?’

And there was disagreement among them.

So they spoke to the blind man again,

‘What do you have to say about this Jesus yourself,

now that he has opened your eyes?’

‘He is a prophet’, replied the man.

‘Are you trying to teach us,’ they replied,

‘and you a sinner through and through, since you were born!’ And

they drove the man away.

EPISTLE READING Ephesians 5:8-14

8 For once you were darkness, but now in Christ you are light. Live as children of light — 9 for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. 10 Try to find out what is pleasing to Christ. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ... 13 ... everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

O God our nurturer, may your word live in us.

And colour our living. Amen!

REFLECTION *Obsession with observing our culture*

John 9: 1-42

Professor William Loader

It is a refreshing reminder to hear again Jesus' rejection of a necessary causal link between disability and sin. While it is clearly outrageous to think otherwise, it often appears to inform attitudes and has been given broad application. So we will hear that people for whom life does not go well are at fault, whether that is about a disability, unemployment or sickness. Its corollary usually holds such an attitude in place: people who prosper are blessed; people blessed are good people. Other people are bad people! Biblical texts can be cited to support the claim.

In the drama which John unfolds here for his congregations the rime and reason for the disability was a matter of promoting the importance of Jesus. Whether the historical Jesus would have seen the needy as opportunities for promotion is doubtful. We need not have an explanation of others' ills in terms of God's benefit. God more likely weeps at others' ills than sees an opportunity for enhancing reputation. But then as now people found many ways of detracting from the dignity of others.

Coming through the narrative is the strength of its source which doubtless portrayed the deed as an act of Christ's compassion. John's story lifts our eyes to a wider perspective. Jesus is not just a healer,

but light for the world's darkness, which was another language for saying: God so loved the world! The response of Jesus in 9:4-5 also reminds the hearers that even Jesus would fail. That, too, would not mean he is bad!

... .. The drama heightens in 9:24-34 as the Pharisees urge that glory be given to God. It had been Jesus' intention all along according to 9:3 to glorify God's works (see also 11:4). The Pharisees profile themselves as righteous and Jesus as a sinner, but in the process further expose their obsession. Hearers of the gospel thus far would know that rather than remaining faithful to Moses and the Law these Pharisees betray it. Its sole function now was to point to Christ's validity. The former blind man makes simple responses which unmask the critics. For that he is expelled. All it needs is for Jesus to find him and tell him the truth about himself as the Son of Man (9:35-38). The drama is nearly over.

It is not difficult to see the passage mirroring the experiences of John's community. Here were Jews in conflict with Jews. Like many passages in John the images, loosed from their Jewish moorings, can sail off to join the armada of anti-Semitism. The Pharisees, like Nicodemus in John 3, are stereotypes. Once we see this, other doors open and we recognise conflicts of our own day - also within Christianity. Wherever rules matter most and people take second place, we have darkness, even if they are divinely warranted in scripture.

Obsession with observance is a characteristic of religion which makes it very dangerous, as many forms of fundamentalism have shown, not least the recent most violent. Such rigidity at the expense of people is not, however, limited to certain widely acknowledged types, but can flourish on both the left wing and the right, among the biblicists and among those serving other ideologies. It is also at home where people read John and the Bible as vehicles for propaganda for their Jesus and their God, to 'win', instead of as testimony to divine compassion which puts people first. As the blind man might have said: 'Well I don't understand much about all of that, but I know when I see people getting helped and I'll run with that!'

The image of light and darkness is widespread across many cultures and religions. It has its roots in human experience of dark and light, night and day. It frequently gives expression to a dualism where darkness is on the negative side and light on the positive. It is only an image. Alas, it has become for some much more than that. The related contrast, black and white, easily becomes the prejudice of racism.

But the image is just an image and has its own fragility. Yes, people have feared the darkness; they cannot see and are afraid. The darkness can be dangerous; we do not see what is coming to and we cannot see where we are or where we are going. But light can also be terrifying, blinding, overwhelming, overpowering. Darkness can be restful, beautiful. Life's joys are not all gaudy. Black can be just as beautiful as white.

Nevertheless the balance of the imagery favours light as something positive, life giving and creating, helping us to see where we are going. It needn't be glaring and intrusive. So with these qualifications - making no idols of imagery - we can approach our text which contrasts two different life styles. The unknown quotation with which our passage ends sets the contrast as life and death within the framework of death (sleep) and resurrection. It might be a fragment from a baptismal liturgy.

It all merges together in an exhortation to hearers of the letter to see themselves as people of light and not to engage in ways of darkness. Judaism was fond of the imagery and this was probably the main source for its Christian use. Writers of the Dead Sea sect contrasted children of light and children of darkness. Here the imagery serves as a vehicle for warning against involvement in immorality.

... the author would also have in mind a range of behaviours which went on privately in his time which we would still see as destructive and abusive. He urges the children of light not to go along with abusive and exploitive behaviours, not to turn a blind eye to dehumanizing acts of any kind.

To walk in the light is not to be naive. It is not about being happy. It is about owning a commitment to justice and embracing a stance of compassion for all human beings. We are still very good at hiding injustices or hiding ourselves from them to our shame. They extend from sexual abuse and exploitation to downright poverty and victimisation of the weak and disempowered. Our author mixes the images when he speaks of the fruit of light, but there is no mistaking what he means. 5:9 makes this clear. Light is goodness and justice and truth. It is not about knowledge or spiritual elevation or mystical ascent, as valuable as these may be.

The light is so connected to Christ that it cannot help but be about compassion and care and concern for human beings. Ultimately it is about the light and life of God which generously confronts us with the possibilities of love and goodness and confronts and exposes our seduction to greed and abuse. Baptism is a very big agenda. It means living with the courage to say no to abuse and exploitation and to say yes to love. Such light and life is the gift held out to us in grace.

HYMN *I heard the voice of Jesus say* **585**

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
so weary and worn and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
and he has made me glad.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
the living water; thirsty one,
stoop down and drink and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in him.

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's light;
look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk,
till travelling days are done.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

THE PRAYER OF JESUS

SONG *Christ be our light*

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Refrain

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice.

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.

5. Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

Refrain

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in your church gathered today.

by Bernadette Farrell

BLESSING

Go forth into this day as the children of God.
Carry with you all that Christ brings,
all that Christ promises for the world.

And may Christ's life be held within our own,
God's creativity enlarge all that we are
and the Spirit lift our hearts in joy.

Amen.

BIDDING *Come as you are* (TiS 693, v1)

Come as you are, that's how I love you.
Come as you are, trust me again,
nothing can change, the love that I bear you,
all will be well, just come as you are.