

***Lent 4 2020.***

Three words stood out from last week's Gospel story about the Samaritan woman at the well and they were "Come and see". This is the third time that John records these words. The first time Jesus issues the invitation and Andrew hears it and brings along Simon, James and John to encounter the Son of Man. The second time Phillip invites his friend Nathaniel to "come and see" as he has found the Lord, and this time the woman call the people of her town to come and see this man from Nazareth whom she recognizes as the Messiah. These three simple words "Come and see" are the most powerful evangelical statement that anyone could make.

For the blind man begging in the dirt a call to come and see would have been frustrating and fruitless however Jesus sees HIM and is compassionate and heals him and he responds by not only seeing Jesus but seeing who Jesus was – the Son of Man. This is not a simple story about healing, rather it is a story of invitation and

response. Jesus saw beyond the blind beggar, the pariah who society had labelled as a sinner, to a man whose life would be a witness to the mission of Jesus. Jesus invites us and we respond (or don't as the case may be). I am reminded of a sermon that I gave at an ordination a few years ago when I pointed out that Jesus' mission statement consisted of four words- "come and follow me" and our modern church likes to complicate things with complex mission statements that arise from many hours of navel gazing.

Dan Clendenin says that "we're challenged to see the world like God sees it. To see things like God does, rather than the way the world does, is an essential part of being God's people in the world. You might say that we want to be careful not to get the vase and the face mixed up."

"To see like God does requires radical vision correction, for God doesn't look at the world like we do. One of the great stories of the bible is that of the anointing of David

to be the king of Israel. The high priest Samuel looked at his seven brawny brothers and heard God dismiss every one of them: "This is not the one. The Lord does not look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." David was the youngest and most unlikely political prospect, but God chose him, and so "from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power."

John's gospel this week concludes with a punch line that is enigmatic and disturbing: "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." When some Pharisees asked if they were blind, Jesus responded, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." Physical blindness is bad enough. The spiritual claim to see is far more dangerous, for it masks a blindness to the need for corrective vision.

One of the most dangerous spiritual places we can live is in the deluded notion that we are fully-sighted, spiritually-speaking. Conversely, the healthiest place to live is not only to acknowledge our spiritual blindness, but also to recognize that as an acceptable place to live. In acknowledging our blindness, we live in the light; by believing that we see fully and rightly, we stumble in the darkness. Acknowledging our spiritual blindness can be embarrassing and threatening. After all, people want answers, clear and concise. We know from experience, and from the disciples and the clerics in John 9, how cruel and condescending, how derogatory and dismissive, people can be towards the blind. Many people said that the man's blindness was God's punishment.

Healthy people befriend their blindness and make their peace with it. Spiritually-sighted people recognize that acknowledging their blindness is an act of liberation not a confession of bondage. The journey toward the light begins when we acknowledge our darkness. Jesus

calls himself "the light of the world" (John 9:5). In his prologue John uses this image of light seven times. In the epistle for this week, Paul urges the Ephesians to "live in the light" and repudiate the "deeds of darkness."

Jesus enlightens our darkness and heals our blindness. Acknowledging our darkness is good and necessary, but longing for the light carries its own unique risks and rewards. But this is what we are called to do as Christians. When we are presented with our baptismal candle we are called on to be people of light. We are called on to look at the world from a different perspective.

How many people do we know who have been classified or pigeon-holed and been denied the opportunity to lead lives that allow them to explore their full potential? To see like God is to look beyond the obvious, the physical, the behavioural sometimes, and to see in the face of another a sister or brother created like us in the image and likeness of God. To see like God is to see people for whom they really are, as Samuel did

and to look beyond David's youth and to see the future leader.

The Pharisees were very quick to judge and to label the blind man and his parents as sinners. How often do we see people with head scarves on or faces covered and assume that they are potential terrorists? Perhaps I too am guilty of the sins of the Pharisees when I dismiss out of hand what I perceive to be unorthodox expressions of Christianity. When a church dismisses as invalid the baptism of a person in another church, or claims a mortgage on true belief then perhaps this is another expression of spiritual blindness in which the outworking of the Holy Spirit is dismissed because it falls outside organisational orthodoxy.

To be an inclusive church we need to see with spiritual eyes, to see the face of Christ in all of our community. Three stories come to mind as I reflect on my ministry. The first was many years ago in a little church at which I often served as a liturgical assistant.

There was a young man of about ten years of age who had Downs Syndrome. One Sunday he decided that he wanted to sit in the sanctuary with me. He did so with great reverence and having him beside me reminded me that we often put labels on people that prevent us from reaching out to them with the love of Christ and to give them the value that they deserve. It was fantastic to see his photo on the front of the Saturday paper some seven years later receiving his year twelve certificate.

A similar story concerns one of my synod reps in Warwick who was a worker at the local Endeavour Centre. He had been labelled as simple and lived on the margins of both the church and the wider society. I gave him steadily increasingly complex roles as server and then Liturgical Assistant and with the help of a few wonderful people he became a key member of our church community and repeatedly offered the invitation to all around him to “come and see”. For me one of my weekly highlights was our Wednesday morning service at which a number of people from the Endeavour community were

present. Their love and enthusiasm never failed to brighten my day and give thanks to God for their presence.

One of the things that I have learned to say in response to some deep and meaningful questions regarding God and faith is “I don’t know”. A sense of absolute certainty in things spiritual or religious – and those two things aren’t always synchronous – can lead to the sort of certainty that eventually becomes spiritual blindness.

Indeed the professional clergy made all the wrong moves in this story. As in many Jesus stories, in this one religion harms instead of heals. The clergy refused to believe eye-witness accounts of the miracle. They were more concerned to maintain ritual righteousness about Sabbath-keeping than to love a fellow human being and rejoice in his wholeness. They blabbered pious clichés. They scapegoated the victim and "hurled insults" at him. They condescendingly claimed a spiritual elitism that

intentionally humiliated the beggar. They demonized him as a "sinner." As they threw him out of the synagogue their rage exploded, "How dare you lecture us!" With that, their own tragic blindness was confirmed, and the story flips — it was the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees, not the physical blindness of the beggar that forms the crux of the story.

It was the Pharisees who were the real sinners. It was they who failed to recognise the great miracle that had occurred in front of them because it didn't fit in with what they considered orthodox behaviour. Sin is simply defined as that which distances us from God. Whenever we judge people on their appearance, or on where they live or lived, how articulate they are, or whether they behave like us, or whether they believe the things we do we run the risk of sinning by not seeing the face of God in our neighbour.

Let us pray: Open our eyes Lord that we might see the wonders of your grace unfolding in the world around us,

that we might see opportunity in the face of adversity, that we may give thanks for the healing that has been wrought in our lives and give thanks to you Lord our God.

Amen.