

## **A Prayer for Those Affected by Coronavirus**

**God of healing and hope, in Jesus you meet us in our places of pain and fear. Look with mercy on those who have contracted the new virus, on any who are vulnerable, and on all who feel in danger. Through this time of global concern, by your Holy Spirit bring out the best not the worst in us. Make us more aware of our interdependence on each other, and of the strength that comes from being one body in you. Through Christ our wounded healer. Amen.**

**The Rev'd Dr Sam Wells, Vicar of St Martin's in the Field**

**Weekly reflection for March 22, 2020 - 4th Sunday of Lent (These are in the bulletin each week)**

**“Not as we see does God see, because we see the appearance but the Lord looks into the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7)**

**How often do we invest our time, talent, and treasure in creating an appearance that does not matter at all to God? We strive to impress with our clothing, home, career, possessions, car, and other marks of distinction. But none of these illusions of greatness will impress God. Instead, He will look into our hearts to see how much we loved Him, how much we loved others and how we showed that love by the way we used our time, talent, and treasure here on earth.**

**I invite you to read and study the scriptures for this Sunday, Mothering Sunday. Perhaps there is a verse or word or line in one of them that speaks to you, such as in the reflection above.**

**Below is a link to a beginners guide to lecto divina**

**<https://bustedhalo.com/ministry-resources/lectio-divina-beginners-guide>**

**<http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-le04-js.php>**

**Introduction To The Scripture For The Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year A**

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

The following material was written by the Rev. John Shearman (jlss@sympatico.ca) of the United Church of Canada. John has structured his offerings so that the first portion can be used as a bulletin insert, while the second portion provides a more in depth 'introduction to the scripture'.

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE**

#### **The Fourth Sunday in Lent - Year A**

**1 SAMUEL 16:1-13** The story was probably part of an ancient cycle of legends about David long before it became part of the written history or scriptures of Israel. It is romantic tale with a double meaning: God's will for Israel was that the nation should have a worthy leader. Also God's intention was that the nation itself should not be so powerful that it would not feel in need God's protection and providence.

**PSALM 23** The much loved psalm has been traditionally associated with David, the shepherd who became king. Romantic as that interpretation may be, it is no longer valid. Because the temple was not built by David, but by his son Solomon, the phrase "the house of the Lord" points to a later date. The spirit of individualism in religious thought found here is also characteristic of the period after Israel's exile in Babylon, not of David's time at least five centuries earlier (about 1000 BC). These facts do nothing to detract from the beauty and comfort emanating from every line of this poem.

**EPHESIANS 5:8 14** Behind this passage stands the belief that pagans and unbelievers are not just in darkness, but are darkness itself. A similar attitude is common to most religious traditions, ancient and modern, where intolerant 'true believers' regard all others as inherently evil. An early Christian hymn may be found in verse 14: "Wake up, sleeper, and rise from death, and Christ will shine upon you."

**JOHN 9:1 41** This long passage includes one of series of signs by which John reveals Jesus as the Son of God. In this case, the sign is the giving of sight to a blind man. The purpose of the miracle is not to let him see, but to elicit his confession of faith. Note that the problem of this man's blindness is one that still troubles many people. Why do bad things happen to good people?

#### **A MORE COMPLETE ANALYSIS:**

**1 SAMUEL 16:1-13** Ancient Israelite sagas make great stories, but also convey rich spiritual truths. The story of God's prophet Samuel selecting David to replace the failed King Saul had profound significance for Israel's future. It probably formed part of an ancient cycle of legends about David long before it became part of the written history or scriptures of Israel.

Several elements of OT historical and religious tradition as well as some real literary pathos stand out in this brief excerpt. Israel's monarchy was a divinely appointed institution, but still subject to the vicissitudes of human political power struggles. Vss. 1-3 point to Samuel's hesitation to follow Yahweh's command to find a replacement. Samuel had genuine feelings for his prodigy who had turned out so badly. The strategy inspired by Yahweh to avoid Saul's wrath, however, points to Samuel's fear that he will be seen as the initiator of a revolution. Vss. 4-5 describe the suspicion which met the prophet's mission in Bethlehem.

In part, this may have been no more than tribal rivalry. Saul was a Benjaminite from Gibeah, just north of Jerusalem. David was a Judean from Bethlehem, in the adjacent tribal territory immediately south of Jerusalem. (Northern and southern Ireland come to mind as modern parallels.) Politically, the purpose of the monarchy had been to unite the diverse tribes of Israel after two hundred years of invasion and settlement in Canaan.

The prophet's task may have been made more difficult by a certain amount of competition for preference. The sacrifice to which Samuel invited Jesse and his sons involved a ritual washing which brought each member of the family before Samuel individually. Samuel's struggle to find the right man, however, indicates how his own sense of values had to change in the process. True to the nature of inspiration, the conversation between Yahweh and Samuel obviously took place within the prophet's own mind.

The end of the story (vss. 11-13) introduces a new set of criteria for the monarchy. The whole story has been cast in a theological and romantic mold with a double meaning: Yahweh's will for Israel was that the nation should have a worthy leader. It was also Yahweh's intention that the nation itself should not be so powerful that it would not feel the need for divine protection and providence. Every modern nation state and government could well heed this enlarged consciousness of divine sovereignty exercised in historical events.

**PSALM 23** The much loved psalm has been traditionally associated with David, the shepherd boy who became king. Romantic as that analysis may be, it is no longer tenable. Because the temple was not built by David, but by his son Solomon, the phrase "the house of the Lord" points to a later date. The spirit of individualism in religious thought found here is also characteristic of the period after Israel's exile in Babylon, not of David's time at least five centuries earlier about 1000 BCE. Nonetheless, countless humble people have found in it a deep and sincere expression of faith. Its spiritual insights speak to people of all ages and circumstances. Who knows how many have made it their life's inspiration and their deathbed prayer?

While in form the psalm resembles a traditional lament, it lacks the normal preface of complaint about illness or hostility. It moves directly to acknowledge the never-failing goodness of God in several life situations.

The image of the good shepherd is one still to be seen in the more sparsely settled wilderness areas of the Holy Land. Here it serves as a metaphor for God. In other OT passages it is a metaphor for the spiritual leaders of Israel. The early church adopted it too, more than likely from the lips of Jesus himself who not only knew the scriptures, but may well have been intimate with many shepherds from the verdant hills around Nazareth where flocks of sheep pastured and water was plentiful in flowing streams and quiet pools. Providing for and protecting his flock is the shepherd's life work. The psalmist uses this theme to describe Yahweh's care for Israel. The response people make, however, is not that of sheep which have no way of expressing their acceptance of this care. Hence, in vss. 5-6 the scene shifts to the table of the provident host who spreads a feast for unexpected guests and to the temple where thanksgiving is offered. For us, the appropriate response is to maintain a similar intimate, thankful fellowship throughout our days with the God who so loves us.

**EPHESIANS 5:8-14** Behind this passage stands the belief that pagans and unbelievers are not just in darkness, but are darkness personified. Sadly, similar attitudes are found in most religions, ancient and modern, where so-called "true believers" exclude others and regard them as inherently evil.

A lively scholarly debate continues over the authorship. Noted scholars from several countries uphold several different theories about it. The named author may or may not have been the apostle Paul. It could have been one of his close associates who knew his teaching well and wrote in his name. It could also have been someone of a generation later also familiar with his teaching who attempted to give a cosmic view of the implications of faith that extended what Paul had written to the Colossians. Whether the letter was addressed to or came from Ephesians, possibly as a covering document for a collection of the apostle's letters, is also disputed.

The distinction between the Christian life and secular life was as critically important in New Testament times as it is today. The Letter to the Ephesians may have begun as a baptismal liturgy and a sermon (or sermons) to new converts. (See Kirby, John C. \*Ephesians, Baptism and Pentecost\*, McGill University Press, 1968, for a complete statement of this hypothesis.) The first part in chs. 1-3 contains a typical prayer of blessing similar to Jewish prayers of this kind. The last section (chs.4- 6) contains of a series of admonitions about the ethical behavior expected of the new church members. This excerpt comes from a passage in which moral issues are characterized in stark terms of light and darkness (5:3-14). In many respects in parallels John 3:17-21 and 1 John 1:5-7; 2:8-11, where the same metaphors define Christian and non-Christian behavior. It also harks back to similar metaphors used by Jesus in Matthew 5:14 and by Paul in Philippians 2:15.

In vss. 8-9, the metaphor goes beyond a simple differentiation of two ways of life. It identifies as inherently evil all who are outside the Christian church, as once were all of those to whom the letter was written. Then it admonishes them to live according to their newly assumed nature which came to them in their baptism. The term 'Christening' captures that spiritual reality better than the liturgical word 'baptism.'

The author of the letter picks up on Paul's "fruit of the Spirit" in Philippians 5:22-23. The metaphors of fruit and light are curiously mixed, however, in vss. 9 and 11. Vss. 12-13 points directly to John 3:17-21. Is it too much to assume that the author knew both the gospel and the Pauline traditions? If as some scholars believe, the letter dates from the early 2nd century, it is possible that he had copies of these before him.

It is possible that an early Christian hymn is quoted in verse 14: "Wake up, sleeper, and rise from death, and Christ will shine upon you." There could also be a memory of Isaiah 60:1 and 9:2 or even John 1:4-9 incorporated here. The figures of sleep and death formed a significant symbol of the state of the human spirit apart from Christ.

With martyrdom the ever-present danger for those early Christians, the metaphors had great significance. As we helplessly witness the darkness of human greed, corruption and violence casting shadows over our world today, the symbolism takes on a very contemporary meaning.

**JOHN 9:1-41** This long passage includes one of six signs by which John told how Jesus was revealed as the Son of God. In this case, the sign or miracle was the giving of sight to a blind man. The purpose of the miracle was not to let him see, but to elicit his confession of faith. And ours too.

The frequent reference to blindness in the scriptures indicates its prevalence in the ancient Middle East. Several known diseases could cause the loss of sight during anyone's life. For instance, the existence of a venereal disease or some other infection such as measles during pregnancy could cause a child to be born blind. Jesus performed several miracles of healing blind people. Paul apparently suffered some sort of psychosomatic blindness at the time of his conversion. (Acts 9:3ff) In all of these biblical instances there was a clear relationship between the physical and the spiritual condition of the persons concerned. Sin and sickness were inevitably linked in the minds of everyone. Consequently, the questions of the disciples and the blind man's community, and challenge of the Pharisees in vss. 2-17 was by no means inappropriate.

As noted above, John had another purpose in telling this story. He gave that reason in vs. 2 quoting Jesus' response to the disciples. The rest of the story really only expands upon this statement. The blind man gave Jesus the opportunity to show forth once again his own true nature for all to see and believe. What the Pharisees did not understand, of course, was the nature of their own spiritual blindness (vss. 40-41) The man who had been healed did make his confession of faith (vss. 35-38) and so brought forth the clarification of the difference between those who are willfully blind and those who trust in Jesus, the Son of God.

John, of course, told this story against the background of the Jewish- Christian controversy raging in his own community at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Similar conditions persist today as we struggle with conflict among religious traditions in the Middle East.

copyright - Comments by Rev. John Shearman and page by Richard J. Fairchild, 2006, please acknowledge the appropriate author if citing these resources.