

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year A

There is a theme of light and seeing coming through today's readings. The first reading reminds us of the principle of 'don't judge a book by its cover'. Appearances can be deceiving. The second reading from the letter to the Ephesians focuses on transparency, and the episode of the man born blind receiving his sight is told by the Johannine writer as a parable of seeing by faith and being blind through stubbornness.

1 Samuel 16:1-6, 6-7, 10-13 The first extract presents the familiar story of the selection and anointing of David to succeed Saul as king over the Israelite tribes. Samuel, who was the last of the tribal Judges, receives a divine commission to go to Bethlehem in Judah to the family of Jesse. Jesse was the grandson of Ruth, the Moabite woman who is featured in the book of Ruth.

The background to this narrative is that the current king, Saul, has been rejected by God because he did not fully carry out God's instructions regarding the Amalekites. So now Samuel has the task of selecting one of Jesse's sons to fill the role of king. Samuel, judging by appearances, picks the strapping Eliab, but realises he is not king material. He then proceeds to go through all of Jesse's seven sons without finding a suitable candidate. Samuel's response is that the Lord has not chosen any of these.

This cautions us against judging by popularly accepted values

When he asks if there are any more sons Samuel is told that the youngest boy is looking after the sheep. When David arrives the Lord prompts Samuel to anoint him king. The prophet pours olive oil on the boy's head which was the customary way to commission a person for an important role. The final sentence in our translation is a bit weak and does not have the impact of the original Hebrew, which states, 'The spirit of the Lord made David have success and prosperity from that day on.' David now becomes the 'anointed one', the *mashiach* (messiah) and shepherd of his people.

The lesson here is a clear one about not judging by appearances, but more broadly it cautions us against judging by popularly accepted values. Today's society generally regards fame, wealth and prestige as the marks of success, but these are external tags assessed by appearances and not by insight from the heart.

Psalms 22/23 The shepherd motif is continued in the well-known, but not always well-understood psalm. Green pastures are rare enough in Israel, so this is an idyllic setting to begin with. The Lord restores the poet's inner being to a state of restful calm and keeps him on the straight and narrow by leading him in a life of goodness. This has the effect of increasing his confidence in the Lord and driving out fear.

The imagery shifts from the sheep in pasture to the guest being entertained by the gracious host. In this context the Hebrew of the poet sings, 'You have spread out a skin for me', and the expression comes from the custom of desert hospitality whereby a host would lay a goatskin blanket on the ground to function as a tablecloth on which to set food for the guests. In time, the Hebrew word *shulkhan*, originally meaning a skin, came to mean a wooden table with legs as used in village settings. Our translation of a banquet being prepared relays the sense of the Hebrew if not the verbal equivalence. Of course, the point of the imagery is to highlight the favouritism granted to the guest by the divine host. This seriously aggravates the enemies of the guest as they gaze at this extravagant hospitality. But they would be driven to fury when they witness the host honour the guest with the anointing of oil.

The guest, bursting with delight and satisfaction, cannot find words and simply says, 'My cup is overflowing.' That says it all, and we could imagine him saying, 'Why would I not stay in the presence of the Lord all my life when I can bask in the rewards of goodness and a life of stress-free wholeness?'

Walk in the light – a life of honesty and transparency

Ephesians 5:8-14 Today's extract from the letter to the Ephesians recalls Jesus' statement to his disciples, *You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* The encouragement to the Ephesians and us is to lead a life of transparency where nothing is done under the counter and everything is above board. The same inspiration occurs in a chapter of the book of Wisdom, which in parable style, shows how a good person

is an embarrassment to wicked and shady characters. To overcome the silently accusing lifestyle of the honest upright person the bad guys devise a plot to eliminate him. Just look at the treatment handed out to Jesus and, before him, John the Immerser. The writer is reassuring good people that, in the long run, they will reap the benefit of openness and transparency with a life of contentment and fulfilment.

John 9:1-41 The gospel reading is a tale about walking in the light and seeing with the heart. The opening question to Jesus addresses the long-held Jewish belief that good people prosper, and bad people suffer. The book of Job was the first major written work that questioned this naïve belief, arguing that our relationship with God is not a *quid pro quo* arrangement. In this long poetic parable Job is portrayed as a man of exemplary character who is made to suffer at the hands of the Tempter who tries to get Job to curse God for allowing him to suffer unfairly. The major issue in Job is, why do bad things happen to good people? But there is no answer. In the end Job leaves it all up to God and is content with unknowing. However, one thing Job is certain of is that there are no pat answers, and pious platitudes are useless. Jesus' answer in this gospel is that the man's blindness is not the result of anyone's sin – that's not how it works. It just is. This response shows the pragmatic realist in Jesus.

The John writer then depicts Jesus declaring that he is the light of the world and is committed to carrying out the work of the one who sent him. Next, Jesus performs a traditional curative practice of smearing a clay paste over the man's eyes. When he washes in the pool of Siloam the blind man begins to see. Our translation has, '...with his sight restored...' which is quite odd as he never had sight to begin with. The original Greek doesn't say this; it reads literally, '...he washed and came away seeing.'

Right-brain insight is ready to respect and ponder another person's truth without prejudice

The 'grunt' in this episode as well as the power of its message begins in the second half when the Pharisees get involved. The cured blind man is taken by his friends to show the Pharisees. We are not told why, but the careful literary construction of this story needs to bring in the opposition to challenge the cure and ultimately reveal the character of Jesus. Then follows the legalistic questioning of the man by the Pharisees who cannot deal with Jesus' action of curing him on the Sabbath. Some argue that a sinner could not bring about such healing. Of course, all the to-ing and fro-ing only produces frustration and exposes the Pharisees' stooping to absurdity. Then finally the self-righteous men call on the argumentum ad hominem to attack the poor beggar personally and justify themselves. When you get nowhere playing the ball, then play the man.

In the end the Pharisees witness Jesus referring to the man's movement towards the light and gaining sight, while they are cast as moving more deeply into blindness. They ask, 'We are not blind, surely?' and Jesus reminds them that there are none so blind as those who refuse to see. This becomes culpable blindness brought on by denial and a left-brain clinging to the illusion of certainty. Right-brain insight takes other considerations into account and is open to a variety of interpretations. It is ready to respect and ponder another person's truth without prejudice.

How open am I to the light? Do I give rein to my imagination to consider other options in any issue? Have I cultivated sensitivity to beauty in nature and the people I meet? Can I accept difference and genuinely rejoice in variety. Is my sense of wonder still active – am I still learning things; do I still feed my curiosity? Am I aware of and attentive to my inner feelings? Do I nourish my inner spirituality with good reading and inspiring conversation and podcasts?

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The mind is like a parachute. It doesn't work unless it's open.

Anonymous

Open minded people don't care to be right; they care to understand. There's never a right or wrong answer. Everything is about understanding.

Unknown

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The teacher had just finished discussing magnets with her Year 3 class.

At the close of the lesson she said, 'My name starts with *m* and I pick up things. What am I?'

Julia thought for a moment, then answered. 'Mum!'

Laurie Woods