

**SERMON SUNDAY 22 MARCH 2020: ST GEORGE'S PARKTOWN
FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT (ALSO KNOWN AS 'MOTHERING SUNDAY')
WE ARE TRANSFORMED BY FAITH**

1 Samuel 16: 1-13 David is anointed King of Israel by Samuel

Psalm 23 : The Lord is my Shepherd

Ephesians 5: 8-14 We move from darkness into light

John 9: 1-41 A blind man receives his sight

[1] Good morning, from the steps of St George's Anglican Church in Parktown, Johannesburg on this fourth Sunday in Lent, which is also known as 'Mothering Sunday' (and not to be confused with the more commercial 'Mother's Day'). Today, we are presented with some deep challenges in scripture. It is all rather dense. We are called upon to apply our minds to the following:

- (i) In the devotions for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Walter Brueggemann in his *A Way Other Than Our Own; Devotions for Lent*, (which, thanks to Fr Eben, we are working through over this Lenten season), we are asked to reflect on Jeremiah 30: 15-16 in which there is a cry over pain;
- (ii) In the collect, we pray that Jesus, the light of the world, will dispel darkness;
- (iii) In the OT reading, David is anointed King of Israel by Samuel;

- (iv) We have psalm 23, one of the most famous and beautiful poems in the history of the literature of the world: 'The Lord is my shepherd';
- (v) In the NT reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are told that we move from darkness into light;
- (vi) In the gospel, a blind man receives his sight at the hands of Jesus.

[2] At first blush, it may seem simple and rather straightforward: we are told that, through faith, light chases away darkness. Certainly, that is true and that message is indeed there today but where do the anointing of David, the Lord is my shepherd and the cry over pain fit in?

[3] It is as though we have all been presented with one big *lectio divina*: the Holy Spirit has presented us with a special message that we shall find by deep reflection and prayer over its meaning for us, at this particular time in our lives.

[4] Let us start 'bottom up,' with the gospel reading about Jesus' miraculous restoration of sight. In a moment of exuberance, I enrolled for a preaching course at St Augustine College. It takes place on the third Saturday of every month. For the February session, we had a talk by Professor Graham Duncan, a Scot and a Presbyterian. Not for nothing has the Scottish preaching tradition a formidable reputation.

[5] He said: 'Whether you believe the metaphysical stories in the Bible are literally true or metaphorical, their spiritual truth is exactly the same.' It is neither a profound nor an original statement. Every properly trained Anglican minister in the worldwide Anglican communion is told this. Indeed, during the retreat lead by Bishop Timothy Bavin in the week before my ordination, he said as much but he added an important rider: 'You have no right to disturb

the sincerely and deeply held religious convictions of others, taught to the faithful over many generations, by insisting that your view is the only correct one.'

[6] But listening to Professor Duncan, speaking with his broad Scottish accent, I had a 'God-moment', a kind of epiphany! It is that in matters of faith, we are often too hard on ourselves and on others. We say to ourselves: 'I can't believe this or that story in the Bible. I am a failure at faith! It is better that I stay away from church lest I become even more upset and disturbed!' Or, we say, with raised eyebrows: 'You know that woman, Mrs Smith (or Mrs Khumalo), she is a fundamentalist, you know! She believes absolutely in the creation account given in Genesis!' Or, 'How can that Mr Jones (or Mr Mokoena) call himself a Christian? He doesn't believe it is true that Jesus walked on water!'

[7] These views blind us to a hugely important truth to which we may especially relate over Lent: the massive, immense, transformative power for the better that comes from faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! This is indeed something to which we can relate because we see its truth in ourselves, our everyday lives, our relationships with others and indeed the whole world itself.

[8] Now we can start to make sense of the readings we have today, including the Lenten devotion chosen by Walter Brueggemann.

[9] David, the shepherd-boy, through the process of his anointing, becomes the man born to be king. Without that life-story he could not have written psalm 23... 'The Lord is my shepherd... he makes me down to lie in

pastures green... he restores my soul... he leads me in the paths of righteousness... I fear no evil for you are with me...'

[10] Brueggemann, in his Lenten devotion for today, reminds us that pain and hardship and suffering have the potential to be transformative for the good. There is hope. Yes, in these dark days of dealing with the coronavirus, there is indeed hope.

[11] Before our Wednesday morning Bible studies were shut down owing to the coronavirus, we had some excellent sessions. A few weeks ago, we had a fascinating discussion on justification by faith, predestination and the elect.

[12] I hardly need say to a congregation like that at St George's that we Anglicans are very sceptical of the doctrines of predestination and the elect. Indeed, Trevor Huddleston, who had a close relationship with St George's and established a very good friendship with Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, wrote in his book, *Naught for Your Comfort*, that John Calvin's interpretations of predestination and the elect helped to give a moral justification for apartheid.

[13] We certainly do not believe that God decided, before each of us was born, who would become a Christian, who would be saved and who would go to heaven.

[14] It can be a very cruel set of beliefs, most dangerously inasmuch as it holds forth the idea that the suffering and hardship of individuals was predetermined by God as the wages for some or other sin. Jesus was very much alive to this danger. The traditional rabbinical view at the time was that suffering occurred because of sin, even the sins of previous generations.

Jesus said of the blind man: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned'. The coronavirus is definitely not, as some people seem to believe, God's punishment visited upon us, either as a society or as individuals.

[15] So, how do we move from darkness into light, as Paul exhorted us in his letter to the Ephesians and as we pray in this morning's collect? We pray, reminding ourselves that Jesus, the light of the world, dispels darkness. In the letter to the Ephesians we are told that we move from darkness into light when Jesus, the light of the world, shines upon us.

[16] We believe that predestination is not about predetermination but rather about something akin to privilege. It is indeed a privilege to have the opportunity to be a Christian. But there is nothing inevitable about our salvation. It depends on how we respond to events. David responds to his anointing by believing utterly in his destiny as king. In the reading we are told that the Holy Spirit ('the spirit of the Lord') came mightily upon him 'from that day forward'. That is for sure. In psalm 139, he says 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made!'

[17] No wonder that David looms so large in OT memory. Walter Brueggemann himself wrote a whole book on the phenomenon in *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory*.

[18] Responsiveness to God is hugely important. We have to DO something. And the doing comes not from good works. As Anglicans, we are very Protestant in our belief that we enter the kingdom of God, not by doing good works but through faith. Thereafter, the good works follow.

[19] Remember, in the gospel reading this morning, the blind man goes and washes in the pool of Siloam. He responds. What makes him respond like this? He responds with faith. And he does not intellectualise. He says 'I do not know how Jesus did it but what I do know is that I was blind and now I can see. I did as he told me.' He says, in effect, 'I responded in faith'.

[20] Our thoughts today are collected around the movement from darkness into light. In the pew leaflet, Fr Eben reminds us that Lent recalls times of wilderness and wandering, from newly freed Hebrew slaves in exile to Jesus' temptation in the desert.

[21] So, how do we get the beautiful life that comes with walking the way of grace? How may the light of Jesus shine upon us? It comes by responding to Jesus with faith.

[22] In the Office of Evening Prayer, (page 63 of your Anglican Prayer Book (APB)), there is this beautiful prayer:

'Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom
You know our needs before we ask
And our ignorance in asking:
Have compassion on our weakness
And those things which for
 Our unworthiness we dare not ask
And our blindness we cannot ask
Grant us through Jesus Christ our Saviour.'

[23] To move from darkness into light, to have our eyes opened, to walk the way of grace, we must respond to Jesus with faith. But we should not make

faith needlessly difficult for ourselves. It may help to remember the ‘three sisters’, or three theological sisters or three divine sisters or three theological virtues, after whom so many beautiful mountains (including our soul-uplifting setting in the Karoo), have been named: faith, hope and love. These are the spiritual mountain tops. With love in our hearts we have the hope that enables us to respond with faith by washing in the pool of Siloam.

[24] Jesus said that the love of God is the first and great commandment and the second like it: love your neighbour as yourself. In the famous passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he says that love is the greatest of the three virtues. The three support each other: if one lets love enter one’s heart, faith and hope tend to follow.

[25] At this time of crisis with the coronavirus, we need hope. Through the transformative power of faith in the Holy Spirit, we shall see the right way forward, we shall find solutions and, ultimately, help to make a better world. We have to respond to God with love in our hearts. After that, all else will follow.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.