

St George's Anglican Church, Travancore
Sermon - Lent 4 Year A, Sunday March 22, 2020



Jesus cures the man born blind - Mironov, Andrei Nikolaevich, 2008

1 Samuel 16.1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5.8-14; John 9.1-41

I wonder what it was like for Jesse's sons to stand in front of the famous prophet Samuel, waiting for him to say something.

I wonder what it was like for Jesse to see his eldest son standing there and hearing the words, "No, not this one."

And then the next, and the next, and the next, down to the seventh: I wonder what each thought on being called, after his older brothers had been rejected.

And still: "No. The Lord has not chosen any of these."

To break the impasse, Samuel asked the obvious question: "Are all your sons here?" Jesse had not thought it worth mentioning David. Unlike most of us (at least some of the time) - God looks not on the outward appearance, but on the heart, and something about young David made him as Luke was to describe him "a man after God's heart" [Acts 13.22].

Alongside this story of God's call of young David from 1 Samuel in the readings set for today, is the story of the blind man healed by Jesus. This is a rare significant encounter to which John does not give a time. It just happened as Jesus walked along, and it was entirely at Jesus' initiative. The man was

clearly bemused by what Jesus said to him, but he did what he was told, and had his sight restored. Jesus did not even wait for the outcome.

The story moves its focus to the almost-comic situation when the man's parents were called to account for what had happened. In the story of Samuel and Jesse, where things did not add up and, in desperation, Samuel asked Jesse: "Have you got any more children?". In this desperate situation, the parents were wheeled in by the temple authorities to help. But they were at a loss to explain what had happened.

I wonder what it was like for them to have no explanation for what had happened to their son, and to be unable to protect him from the fury of the religious authorities.

This story gives us an insight into what it is like to be caught up in the ways of God, when we do not understand what is going on. This is what it is like to sense that God is doing something in our lives that breaks out beyond what our family or our friends expect of us.

And, on this Mothering Sunday, when we hear two stories where parents find their children being led by God into uncharted territory, these experiences give us an inkling of what it is like for all of us, as parents or in other roles, to nurture other people in the unexpected ways of God, and to free them to respond to the call of God. Because responding to God's call often challenges us to seek the permission of those whom we trust and those whom we love.

At the time I was struggling to understand what was being asked of me, quite late in life, as I questioned in my mind whether this could be God's call to ordained ministry, I really needed some affirmation, or denial, of what I thought was such a call. This was particularly important in the light of the fact that many years earlier, I had been quite convinced that what I had felt to be such a call was indeed not one at all. I had been convinced of this by the church simply not being prepared or even, because of its practices in those benighted days, been able to accommodate. I was inclined to see if this had changed, but I needed my family, my friends and my mentors to at least comment before I could go further. I think I was really looking for someone who would say bluntly, "Don't be silly, it's just a mid-life crisis, you'll get over it." But no-one, literally no-one said that; everyone – family, friends, close colleagues, and mentors – when I mentioned my intention to formally explore ordained ministry, said something like, "Yes, of course you will", or "I've known for ages that that's where you've been heading." I will skip the tedious bits about diocesan procedures and my continuing doubts and conclude this by saying that my training and my eventual ordination were the most challenging and fulfilling period of my life, spiritually, intellectually, personally, and professionally, of my life to that point.

In our Gospel reading Jesus questions the man he has cured of blindness: '*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*' The man's response to Jesus' questioning, "*Lord, I believe*" is so simple. It was during my time of discernment and formation that I learned that, like the blind man, I was called simply to trust Christ and to believe. Like David, I was called to accept God's decision and just do it, trust that "*the Lord looks on the heart*" and not try to analyse why God chose one who was quite well aware of how short he fell of what he thought was needed to serve in this way.

Week by week, in Lent, we have heard stories of Christ's encounters in the Gospels. Who knows what we will discover as we reflect on those stories? Perhaps our Lenten discipline can be to let our minds wander into the stories we are hearing, and allow ourselves to wonder. What we might well do is ponder how we respond to Jesus in the light of these scriptures.

Although we do not know what happened after the blind man had worshipped Jesus, as is also the case in the stories of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, where we also do not know what happened next, we do know that his response was to worship. John clearly believes worship is the appropriate response to God's grace.

In our tradition a major element of worshipping Jesus is to worship together and to share the holy sacraments as a community of Christian people – we are going to have to find new ways of doing this in the light of current circumstances. I will be letting people know how my and our thinking evolves particularly about the weeks between now and Easter, and for however long we are unable to worship as we have done for so long.

Into today's scriptures God is inviting us to write our next bits of story, our lives and the lives of those for whom we are responsible and whom we nurture in life, and in the faith. Let us resolve to do so, in these challenging and worrying days, as creatively and devoutly as we can.

The Lord be with you.

Richard Murray 19-21 March 2020