

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT 22 MARCH 2020

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

*Lord God, grant that through your spoken Word we may behold your living presence. Amen*

This is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent as we edge ever closer to Easter, and here in the Diocese of Johannesburg many of us clergy find ourselves asking “*How do we effectively minister to our parishes during this time?*” *In this odd season of quarantining and social distancing and church service suspending, how can we maintain our duties to the communities we have been called to serve? The truth is none of us have experienced this situation to this magnitude and it is just as confusing and disorienting to us clergy. We recognize that we can't be near you physically and this is but one way in which we can stay connected with you.*

Over the next few weeks our society will be taking in all kinds of messages—some helpful, some not, some simply distracting, particularly during this time when most of us are lonely and anxious. Let us not allow these many voices to tempt our eyes away from God and our connection to community.

Today's scripture readings speak of light and darkness, of restoration of sight out of blindness. In our Reading in the 1<sup>st</sup> Book of Samuel we hear of a description of the anointing of David as the second king of Israel. In this story God chooses the most unlikely candidate, David, the shepherd boy, the youngest son of Jesse to be king. God cautions Samuel “*Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.*”

This story illustrates how blind we can be in our judgments and how much we need God's help. Psalm 23, that most comforting of psalms, celebrates the care and compassion of God, our Good Shepherd, singing: *23:4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.* **This means that even though circumstances can be challenging, yet we can still experience God's presence and know that it is well with our souls.** Notice that the Psalmist is

traveling through the darkest valley with enemies all around – enemies can also be understood as calamity, danger, threat. Not unlike the turmoil and threat that is caused by Corona virus today that has compelled us to stay home on a day that we should be worshipping with our fellow brothers and sisters in a Church building! This Psalm reminds us that many of life's challenges will not go away, but we can experience God's presence even in the midst of turmoil and threat.

In the second reading, the Apostle Paul's letter reminds the Ephesians of their new responsibility as children of light: *"8 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light- for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true."* This is a reminder to us as well.

Our Gospel Reading, John 9 is about the contrast of light and darkness and healing and wholeness. The Gospel gives the account of the cure of the blind man on the Sabbath and how, interestingly, as he progressively sees more and more, the Pharisees who believe they have spiritual insight, see less and less. **It starts with the disciples of Jesus, who sees the blind man as a subject of an interesting debate on the cause of blindness.** Jesus spat on the ground, made a paste of mud, rubbed it into his eyes and asked him to go wash into the pool of Siloam. Incidentally, receiving sight does not come easy. It is perhaps a slow process. The focus shifts from the blind man who can now see, to the Pharisees who refuse to see the truth. **They question the blind man, they question whether it is proper to heal on the Sabbath, they question whether Jesus is acting with the power of God or the power of evil.** The more they try to distort the truth the more the man is adamant in witnessing to Jesus

This magnificent story tells us that light triumphs over darkness, truth over untruth, faith over disbelief. **It also tells us that while physical blindness is certainly a terrible condition, spiritual blindness is much worse. One of the most dangerous spiritual situations we can live in is in the deluded notion that we can see clearly, spiritually-speaking.** But when you come to think of it, the healthiest place to be is not only when we acknowledge our spiritual blindness, but also when we recognize that and accept it as a place we often find ourselves in.

In acknowledging our blindness, we find that the world around us is revealed and we begin to see a little more clearly and yet the moment we think we have absolute certainty, that's often the time we find ourselves stumbling in the dark, maybe because we have become too self-reliant, having forgotten our need for God.

Acknowledging our spiritual blindness can be embarrassing and threatening and frustrating. After all, we want answers, and we want them to be clear and precise. **One of the lessons that we are currently learning in living through the experience of COVID-19 is that we do not have the certainty nor the clarity nor the precision that we so often rely on in our day to day lives!**

We, today, are facing the threat of disease and we are all aware of the turmoil facing many South Africans and indeed the rest of the world during this time: **This challenge, can so paralyse us with fear that we are driven to give up on our faith or worse, start blaming it on God. You have heard it many times I'm sure "God is punishing humanity for their sins through this virus" "God is testing us" – if you subscribe to that kind of God, then you are still in the realm of darkness.**

COVID-19 is not a punishment sent by God; we know how it started. But we also know that God can bring wholeness to a diseased situation - so why not take this time of compulsory 'social distancing' **to reflect on life, its meaning, how we live it, how we interact with others.**

We are disciples of the Living Christ who restores sight where there is blindness, healing and wholeness where there is sickness, light where there is darkness. One who calls us to live courageously, especially during these uncertain times.

**Today's readings challenge us to walk in the light. God is with us in threatening times and God's all-embracing love surrounds us. In living out this conviction we can tap into resources beyond our imagination for the good of ourselves and the world. May God's light continue to shine in our hearts, in our homes and in our communities.**