

St Philip's Anglican Church

Fourth Sunday in Lent — Year A — 3 April 2011

Ps 23, Ephesians 5.8-14. John 9.1-41

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Today, the fourth Sunday in Lent, is traditionally Mothering Sunday. It seems to have begun when the church adapted a Roman festival of the mother goddess as a celebration of Mary as a mother and of the idea of 'mother church'. Centuries later, on this day people would go "a-mothering"—visiting their local mother church, such as a cathedral. Later still, this was a day when domestic servants allowed to visit their mothers and families. There might be a traditional Simnel cake—which has its own symbolism—to celebrate the reunion of families amidst the austerity of Lent.

The traditional Gospel reading for today, including in the *Book of Common Prayer*, is the feeding of the five thousand from chapter six of John's gospel. It is one of a series of signs and events woven together in chapters two to eleven of John to show Jesus to be the Son of God and Messiah.

Today's reading about the healing of a man who was born blind, follows after a passage in which Jesus describes himself as the light of the world—a claim he makes again in today's chapter. John's gospel takes this story to show that Jesus brings physical and spiritual light into human lives.

"Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind," the healed man said to the Pharisees. And so it is, at least as far as the Bible is concerned. The Restoration of sight is not among the healings in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, only Jesus healed the blind. Yet in the gospels, the restoration of eyesight is among the most common of Jesus' healing works.

In Scripture, the restoration of sight is associated with the ministry of the Messiah. Luke tells us of when Jesus read in the synagogue from Isaiah (61.1): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind . . ."

The congenitally blind man received physical sight—and spiritual sight as he recognized and believed in Jesus.

In his healing ministry, Jesus dealt with people as best met their needs. God heals us as God knows is best for us and as we reach out in faith. Jesus has commissioned us to minister healing in the same way, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The description of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12 refers not to a gift of healing given by the Holy Spirit but to *gifts* (plural) of healing. God's healing is not 'one size fits all' but one *source* fits all. It is sensitive, inclusive, radical, and life changing. The Holy Spirit's gifts of healing open us up to spiritual light.

Those of us who have physical or psychological difficulties may wonder, "Why am I like this?" The disciples asked Jesus a similar question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was

born blind?”

It was widely held that suffering was due to sin. The rabbis had long declared that suffering was caused by sin. The disciples evidently accepted this, but how could a man have sinned before his birth?

Jesus rejected the whole idea. The man’s blindness was not because of sin, but “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.”

But how can we accept that a life-long physical or mental disability might be so that the works of God can be revealed? I confess that I don’t quite understand this statement by Jesus.

But Jesus isn’t saying that that an affliction like blindness is good. Nor is it God’s will. Yet if we *do* have a physical, emotional, or mental need—a need of healing—God’s good work can be revealed in us as a result of it.

This Lent, Rebecca has encouraged us to *recognise*, *repent*, and *reconnect*.

A place to begin is to *recognise* that God’s healing is there for us in many ways. Healing comes, for example, as resentment, anxiety, anger, depression and bitterness about our physical and psychological problems are taken away, forgiven and dissolved in God’s love.

Another place to begin is to embrace God’s healing when it’s offered in prayer, and through the loving care of others. “He restores my soul”, Psalm 23 says. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

Let’s *recognise* God’s healing offered to each of us. It’s tempting to be prideful about our struggles to overcome a disabling problem and it takes humility to give it all into God’s hands.

Let’s *repent* if we have been unwilling or unable to receive the healing—of whatever kind—that God offers.

Lent is not just about self-denial; it’s also about receiving and growing up: growing up into the resurrection life of Jesus Christ that we will soon celebrate at Easter. Let’s *reconnect* with God’s healing.

After saying that the man’s blindness was so that the works of God should be revealed, Jesus then said that “We must work the works of him who sent me—while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.”

The early manuscripts disagree on whether Jesus said, “*I* must work” or “*We* must work”. It doesn’t make much difference, as Jesus also said in John 14.12, “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” We are commissioned to continue the work that Jesus began in his earthly ministry—to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.

In John, healings are most commonly described simply as ‘works’ —the Greek word is *ergon*—as in the English word ‘ergonomic’ and in ‘erg’—the unit of measurement for energy.

While to heal the blind seems a miracle to us—at least in the absence of medical science—to God it is simply work. Yet it is the same kind of work that created the entire universe. And God was at work in the healing of a man whose name we do not know.

Prayer and contemplation is work. St Benedict called the daily office of monastic prayer the *opus Dei*, the work of God.

Cleaning the floors and fixing the roof is work. Preaching is work. Earning a living is work. Caring for a family is work. All are able to be God's work in us and through us.

Once again, we can *recognize* where we are in our work by prayerfully examining the things we do as part of our commitments and every day life—in church and everywhere else.

Faithfulness is a fruit of God's Spirit and much praised in Scripture. But faith does not demand an excessive and ever-increasing workload. To be about God's work for us we may have to *stop* doing some things, to *repent* of them so to speak—bearing in mind that to repent is simply to change one's mind and direction.

It's a good idea once a year (perhaps in Advent or Lent) to review prayerfully the things we do and—as well taking up new commitments and ideas—perhaps set aside some things.

“Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord,” as we heard in this morning's reading from Ephesians. “He leads me in right paths,” Psalm 23 says. “He leads me beside still waters.” If our tasks destroy our inner stillness, we need to try to reconsider them.

Some things we can be grateful for, accept as having been good, and leave behind. This applies to our Parish as a whole, as well as each of us individually.

To do the work of God, let's also *recognize*, receive and use the gifts the Holy Spirit is giving to each us, including gifts of healing but also gifts of wisdom, knowledge, prophesy, discernment of spirits, working of miracles and, yes, tongues and the interpretation of tongues—as well as many other abilities, gifts and talents.

Let *repent* if we have been unwilling to receive God-given gifts of power and ability—spiritual gifting beyond our natural talents and skills.

This Lent let's *reconnect* with the Holy Spirit's power, guidance and wisdom in choosing what to do, what not to do and how to live.

And let's invite the Holy Spirit to bring us all into God's healing and restoration in all of life.

Brian McKinlay