

Sight, Insight and Light

St Philips' Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A — 19 March 2023 Reverend Martin Johnson

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

‘As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’

One of the treasures of St Philip's is this offertory plate. It was given to the Parish in 1960, before the church was even completed, by RN Wardle who had served as a Captain in the Desert Mounted Corps during the Great War. He purchased this plate in 1918 when in Damascus in a 'Street called Straight'.

Those of you familiar with the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus will recognise the name of this street. In the book of Acts we read:

Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.

For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.'

There is a very good reason why we are hearing the readings set down for this morning. They are readings about initiation. The gospel passage about the man born blind, like the account of Paul on the road to Damascus are all about initiation. The blind man, like Paul, receives sight but there is more going on here than simply physical blindness. They are both initiated into a new world, one that will prove to be demanding.

St Augustine, in the 4th century, tells us that the story of Jesus and the blind man is a sacramental account. The act of miraculous healing pointed to the man's receiving a sense of insight. He was able to see differently. Jesus anoints him with mud and spittle and sends him off to the pool of Siloam to wash. For Augustine, the man had been baptised and was therefore able to see! But that was a sign of something greater. True sight, insight comes after his realization of who exactly has healed him and his subsequent declaration of faith. The same happened to Paul after Ananias had laid his hands on him—the scales fell from his eyes.

As I mentioned in previous weeks, in the early Church the gospel reading of the man born blind would have been heard by those preparing to be baptised at Easter. They would have been preparing for an act of initiation that would include a declaration of their faith and a coming to the light, a renewed vision of the world.

This issue of initiation is one that we face in the Church today, indeed the Church has wrestled with it since time immemorial. In the past, in our tradition, the rites of Baptism and Confirmation were very much part of Church practise and life. Families would gather, the church would be full, there would a celebratory lunch afterwards. I'm sure we've all experienced such a day! This is not the case today; the age of the inter-generational passing



on of faith has passed. We might mourn the passing of this tradition, but this was not the norm in centuries past. When you read carefully at the initiation of Paul, of David's 'initiation' in today's OT reading, and that of the blind man, and when you look at the early Church, there was a clear breaking away from former generations. They were doing something new and there is almost a sense of anxiety about this new path they are taking. We have not yet reached that point, but I wonder, first . . . is this the future and secondly . . . is this not a more authentic way? Does the future lie in folk desiring an authentic 'new' way of seeing the world, in finding new insight? And how might we offer such a way?

If we begin with David's anointing as the new prospective King, we are in uncharted territory. We need to be reminded that David is almost usurping Saul's throne. He is in effect the instrument of a coup! It is a new regime born out of difficulty. God's favour, we are told, no longer rests with Saul. There is no neat transfer of power; Saul doesn't step graciously aside. There is intrigue, politics, violence. The change of regime is untidy and in David the new King is an unlikely candidate. Even the great prophet Samuel does not really 'see' the future clearly, he certainly does not see in David the future. As we often say . . . the future is not what it was!

This question of insight is something that comes to the fore in the lengthy passage from John's gospel. The man born blind—perhaps John is suggesting that we are all born blind—is gradually given the sight, or rather the insight, to understand who this person is that has healed him. His initiation is gradual, and it is one that involves a break with the past. His parents are wary, naturally; they are concerned that they will be banished from the synagogue.

This question of initiation is something that is ongoing in our lives of faith, it is fearful sometimes, it involves a break with the past; it involves an awakening . . . as Paul would have it, a resurrection. There is so much to be said about the Church and its future; much of it beyond our imagining. But clearly there will be a decisive break with the more recent past, and a reclaiming of the something of the Church as it was envisioned when those first catechumens sat in a darkened baptistery ready to be immersed in water and smothered with oil, before being led into a church brightly lit, to begin their new lives of insightful, prayerful, worshipful living.

What of us, we who are living at the end of a particular era of the Christian epoch? We need to be humble, courageous, tender, loving, forgiving, faithful, hopeful. These won't change, they are eternal. As we are reminded in our weekly Lenten reflections from Dr Colin:

We must let the light burn its way of goodness, truth and right through our lives so we might live the light. These form the framework for discernment. Goodness, truthfulness in word and deed and justice, which puts all human relationships to rights, are the light of Christ in which we walk.

What then do we hand on? Perhaps it is just that, the light . . . that's enough. 'I am . . . the light of the world.' Amen.