

When we look at the world around us, when we sit with others - what do we see? When we look at a person or a situation - what influences limit us or expand our imagination? All of our readings today weave around this Lenten theme of letting go of what limits capacity to be the people God created us to be. Allowing God to be the light which opens us to be more fully ourselves, and in turn more fully Gods.

In Samuel we are reminded that God does not see a person, as we see a person – *it is what is on the inside that matter rather than stature*. The passage begins with God addressing Samuel's grief, a grief that is getting in the way of Samuel being able to fulfil his role as prophet. Samuel had anointed Saul as the first King of Israel, and in many ways seems to feel that his role is over, only to have Saul disappoint him, and more importantly he sees Saul turn from God's way. It is this broken trust and hope that Samuel is grieving, but God has more work for him to do... more light to spread. And so God sends Samuel to anoint a new King from amongst the children of Jesse. Samuel isn't keen to go however - and is even surly with God – *Saul will kill me if he hears!* God has to provide an entire plan for Samuel before he will move. And even when Samuel arrives and begins to meet Jesse's sons – he continues to argue with God – surely the strength Eliab makes him the obvious King – just

like Saul. But God says No! God will eventually show Samuel that it is David, the Shepherd Boy, who is anointed as the next King.

I wonder how often consciously or unconsciously we are like Samuel – either caught in our disappointment because others have not behaved as we expected and so we give up. Or we don't see the potential of another before us because the potential doesn't look as we think it should! While unconscious bias might feel like it is a new trendy concept, it is a reality that has been with us throughout history.

Samuel is so invested not only in Saul, but the image of the King that Saul has offered, it is hard for him to imagine that a King will look different to his concept. So God needs to intervene. Any of you have been following Anglican politics in recent months will see a similar story playing out since Bishop Sarah was announced as the incoming Archbishop of Canterbury. Sarah does not look to many the way an archbishop should. She is a different gender, has a different theology than many who have gone before her. We can dress up discrimination in many different ways, but in the end – like with Samuel – God shows us that leadership may look very different to what the majority might have expected.

As we continue our journey through Lent, this story of Samuel might challenge us to think about what expectations, what constructs or beliefs or even values are we holding onto that may be a barrier to us hearing what God is asking, or being all that we are able to be. Or even giving space for others to flourish.

And so this story of challenge is paired with another very long reading from John's Gospel which begins with Jesus making an 'I am' statement – *Jesus is a light in the world* that will highlight some of these barriers we have created – who will challenge the bias and discrimination that has been allowed to fester and block our relationship with God.

In John's Gospel immediately after Jesus explaining that his is the light of the world, we encounter a man born blind, and a strange interaction about the impact of sin. Sin is that which separates us from God. Jesus states very clearly that it is not sin that has caused this person to be born blind. And in a sense this conversation about sin is secondary to the main theme of this passage which is about the coming of light – the exposure of those attitudes or beliefs that limit a person or communities' ability to follow God.

Alongside the story of the man, we have the interaction with the pharisees and questions about Jesus true identity. For the Gospel writer Pharisees are depicted as

monitors of Jewish society, or gatekeepers of appropriate behaviours. Historically this in many ways overstates their influence, but the author is highlighting how gatekeepers can attempt to limit what God is creating. In this story, the man's parents, as well as others, are fearful of openly naming who Jesus is, because they fear the gatekeepers.

Notice however that the most vulnerable person in the story, the man born blind, who Jesus brings light to, does not fear sharing that light further. He is prepared to name Jesus as the Messiah – as the bringer of light – and as a result is ejected from the synagogue. As the man born blind grows in insight and faith, the hearts of the gatekeepers appear to become harder.

The image of light, of insight, of growth is fabulous in this perplexing narrative in many ways. It challenges the disciples, and us, to move beyond just listening to Jesus; but to use the light to help us see what is actually taking place – to notice not only the gatekeepers but also our own prejudice that limits faith. The key focus I think in this passage is that it is in hearing and seeing the light of Christ – we are able to believe. As such, as the writer to the Ephesians reminds us, we need to constantly walk in the light.

The man born blind is more than someone who Jesus heals; Jesus draws him in. Like the shepherd (described in the next chapter of John), Jesus finds the blind man when he has been cast out or excluded (9:35). Jesus provides for him much more than sight– Jesus gives, as the good shepherd gives all of his sheep–the protection of the fold or his community (10:16), and the gift of abundant life (10:10). As a result, hearing and seeing are much more than ways someone recognizes or believes in Jesus. They are, in fact, expressions of relationship with Jesus and relationship with Jesus means also relationship with God the creator (10:14-15).¹

Our Lenten journey, particularly as we approach Holy Week, is a time of focusing on this relationship. A time when we are intent in our contemplation and prayer, in our reading and listening, in our talking and hoping – and letting go of those things which limit this relationship.

As a church it can be a time when we reflect on how we are community. Are there times when we are the gatekeepers who prevent others from growing in faith? Or are there times when like Samuel our imagination of what is possible is limited because we think we know

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-john-91-41-2>

what faith looks like, and so we aren't open to growing and changing as God would like us to?

Today's passages are both confronting and words of comfort. They remind us that all God wants for us is to live in the light – to be the fullness of all that God has created, not only individually but as communities which reflect love and hope and faith. But they also remind us that it is too easy to get stuck in a familiar pattern when we think we know who and what God is and wants.

We have to let go of the conscious and unconscious bias that limits how we treat ourselves and others.

Regardless of our age or experience, God has given us gifts to be used in each season, if we are open to learning what that might look like for each of us.

The man born blind did not seek Jesus out, rather, Jesus met him as he went about his daily routine. But the transformation took place when he let go of what he knew, and dared to change his path that day.

As we draw towards Holy week, may we be open to the transforming spirit of Christ who invites us, to let go of our prejudice, to adapt and learn, to see and hear, that in faith we may walk as children of the light.

What a wonderful gift we are offered! Amen.