

4th Sunday in Lent (year A)

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

Seeing into the Heart – Seeing as God Sees

God has decided that Israel needs a new king and has given Samuel the job of finding one. Samuel has been sent off to look for this new ruler among the sons of Jesse. Seven of Jesse's sons are brought before Samuel. They're an impressive lot, but each time, when Samuel thought he had the right one, God said, "No – not this one." By the time Samuel got to the seventh, and found that not even this was God's choice, he must have been wondering what next. So he asked Jesse if there were any more. "Sure – there's the youngest, David, but he's out looking after the sheep." Samuel asks for David to be summoned. When he sees him, he knows that this is God's choice for the next king.

God's choice is almost a 'nobody' – an afterthought – a young lad who was out in the paddocks looking after sheep. God's point to Samuel is this: "I look at people differently than humans do. Humans look at what's on the surface. I look into the heart."

God doesn't see as we see. We have a tendency to look at the externals, to judge people by their outward appearance. Admit it, we do this all the time, don't we! We judge people by how they look. I catch myself doing it. And if it's not their physical looks, then it's other externals such as status or money or perceived success. God's word to Samuel is a reminder that God sees differently. God looks beyond appearances and sees deep into the heart, perceiving a value that we may not. This poses a question: how are we seeing each other, how are we seeing people we seek to reach out to in the communities we live and work in? What are we not seeing when we focus on the externals? How can we see as God sees?

God has a habit of using people whom we overlook – the ones we think aren't ready, or wise enough, or experienced enough, or strong enough. That's what God is doing here. God's choice for king is a young shepherd boy with no experience, no qualifications, and no greatness. We're often blind to people's potential (even to our own potential). We say, it's just them, –it's just me. We're blind to what God sees. That challenges me. It challenges the way I look at people and leaves me thinking, what am I missing? What am I not seeing?

Something similar happens in the Gospel story. Jesus gives sight to a man born blind. This man would have been forced to live on the edges of society – ignored and probably considered a nuisance. In those days people thought that disabilities were caused by sin, but Jesus saw things differently. He chose to use this situation to demonstrate God's power. The man is healed and shouts out, "Lord, I believe." But the religious people were spiritually blind. They were too tied up with their preconceptions – blinded by their bias and prejudice and unable to see that God was doing something new and wonderful. Those who should have been in the know are in the dark. They just don't get it. Once again, a forgotten nobody is the one who experiences God's power and loving-kindness.

Things don't change much over the centuries. I find it is all-too easy to be blind to what God is doing about us in our community, in our friends, and in our parish – blind to seeing what God sees. And that includes circumstances and situations, like all that's happening around the Coronavirus crisis. There's what presents on the surface: people panicking, the fears and anxieties that are emerging, and the challenges that it will present for the church. But then I have to stop and ask, what might God be seeing in this situation? How might we work with God to find something new and creative in an experience that others only see chaos and threat?

The story of the power of God's life-changing love isn't over yet. God wants to keep transforming us – to do new things with us. We may be tempted to think that we don't matter – that what we do, that who we are – isn't important – or that a situation is nothing but negative. If, however, all we can see is what's on the surface – what presents to us – we're in trouble. Seeing as God sees – seeing truly and deeply – means looking beyond existing conditions. It means seeing into the heart of people and situations, leaning into our imaginations until we see a reality beyond what is and catching a glimpse of what God sees.

In the face of this present crisis this applies to our future as a parish, to our personal lives and ministries, to our nation, and to our wider community. Do we allow what we see on the surface to be the defining factor or do we believe God does creative things through us and with us? It's not a matter of denying the challenges we face but is a way of leaning into our imagination. I don't know what the future holds for us, but what I believe is that God travels with us and, as David said in his psalm, makes us lie down in green pastures... and will revive our spirits and guide us. I believe God's goodness and mercy shall follow us.

We have a choice before us. The letter to the Ephesians expressed it. We can carry on in the darkness or we can live as children of the light. That doesn't give you any neat answers – it doesn't supply a blueprint for the future. Instead, it presents us with a question. Are we willing to pray – to ask God to help us see things as God sees them – to look beyond existing conditions and see into the heart of people and situations – to lean into our imaginations until we see the reality beyond what is. So, are you prepared to see situations, dynamics, and each other with different eyes, and catch a glimpse of something new – a new potential, new possibilities?

My prayer is that we be like Samuel and allow God to show us something new in the unlikeliest situations, places, and people. When David stood before Samuel, God said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." These words apply to us. The Lord looks upon each of us today in the same way and says, "This is the one." ... You and I are the ones. And in faith, we can only respond, as did the man born blind, and say, "Lord, I believe."

God of healing and sight,
we long to see with eyes of faith.
Heal all that blinds us,
renew our vision,
and grant us to see afresh
all that you are doing;
For you are alive and reign with the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen

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