

4th Sunday in Lent

Fr Jarred Mercer

1 Sam 16.1, 6-7, 10-13

Ps 23

Eph 5.8-14

Jn 9.1-41

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

On Mothering Sunday, there are two obvious subjects to preach about: mothers, and the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus and therefore mother of his body, the Church—our mother. Now, you will probably be shocked that an Anglo-Catholic priest is not going to take up the opportunity to talk about Our Lady! But, after I'm sure you were all busy yesterday celebrating the Feast of the

Annunciation, I feel at liberty to let the opportunity pass just this once.

And while I wish to say briefly to all mothers, including those expectant first-time mothers, you are in the prayers of the Church, and that I hope each day, including this one, you are shown all the honour and love you truly deserve, I am not preaching this morning on motherhood either. So we turn to our readings.

We can genuinely say, I think, that our whole lives are lived as continuous running commentaries on this morning's Gospel passage.

We are those born blind and given sight. We are the prideful Pharisees, adjudicating where and how others belong or are excluded. We are the fearful parents seeking to save our own skin. And

we, as Paul has it, are light, as Christ claims here to be the Light of the world.

The light of the world. While we all might feel like we are on a vitamin D high after two full days of sunshine, it can be difficult to talk about light in this world.

Light, amidst so much despair. Light, when such darkness, such lunacy, such deranged madness can suddenly arrive out of the blue on a bridge at Westminster; when the light of life can suddenly be snuffed out for no other reason than one man's deceived, nihilistic impulse given a false purpose by parading as faith or devotion. Light, in a world where darkness doesn't even hide.

'I am the light of the world', Jesus says. We might well want to ask him what world he is talking about.

Precisely. What world do we see? The oppressive world of exclusion and violence is so easy to come by, so easy to see. But Jesus offers another way, a new way of seeing the world: a world that light has touched. 'For judgment I came into this world', Jesus claims, 'that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind'.

I've said it here before, and I'll say it again, the Christian life is about *vision. Illumination.* We are learning to see.

There is a reason why 'Be Thou My Vision', which we sang just a few minutes ago, is one of my favourite hymns. And it is not only that the tune sounds like it should be played by an Irishman on a fiddle at 2am after the bar is closed. It is that those words, 'Be thou my vision', perhaps sum up

our entire life of prayer. 'Be my vision' is the cry of the Christian life. Christians *want to see*.

There are more recorded miracles of Jesus giving sight to the blind than any other type of healing. In the Old Testament giving sight to the blind was directly associated with God, and also seen as an activity of the coming Messiah—it is a divine function: God gives *sight*.

The first word of God in Scripture, which brings creation into being, is *light*, and here God's Word has come to us as the Light of the World, and recreates. God takes dust of the earth and forms humanity and here Jesus takes the dust of the earth and grants vision for a new world to a man born blind.

Jesus is passing by the man and heals him. The man is then taken before Pharisees, those who had

placed themselves in charge of adjudicating all things spiritual.

They refuse to believe the man's testimony, and so call his parents forward, who verify that he was indeed blind from birth but now sees. When asked how this happened, his parents fear being cast out of the community (as of course, their 'unclean' son had always been) and so throw their son under the bus: 'he is of age, ask him', they plead.

So they call the man before them a second time. 'Give God the praise; we know that [Jesus] is a sinner'. The man born blind, with his newly acquired vision, is astonished: 'This is a marvel!' He claims. '*You* do not know where [Jesus] comes from, and yet he opened my eyes . . . If this man were not from God, he could do nothing'.

They respond to his claim: 'You were born in utter sin, and would *you* teach *us*?' And they cast him out. Still rejected, still excluded, still 'unclean', even after his eyes were opened.

This response gets to the core of much of what is going on here. Jesus' entire interaction with the blind man begins by the disciples asking him who had sinned, the man or his parents, to make him born blind. And Jesus' response is striking. They asked for the *cause* of this man's blindness, but Jesus answers with the *purpose* of his *sight*: 'It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him'. The man is healed that the glory of God might be revealed.

This does not mean that God made this man suffer for so many years through his blindness, just to

reveal how great his power is, as if he were putting on a show.

This man was born in a broken world which administers blessing and tragedy alike. This is how our world works. Earthquakes do not happen because God gets angry with sinners. Earthquakes happen because tectonic plates shift causing the earth's surface to shake. People are tragically born blind because of our genetic frailties and instabilities. God is not playing games.

What God does do here is take tragedy—the mundane, often happenstance and meaningless, random tragedy of our world—and turn it towards glory: he glorifies it.

The works of God are made manifest, the glory of God is shown, not in some demonstration of healing powers, but in that the man who was

always blind now clearly sees. Through the world of darkness and tragedy, of oppression and exclusion, he sees Jesus, the true Light of the world.

We are too often, just like those who neglect or cast out the man in our reading, consumed by our own inadequate lights. Our eyes are accustomed only to dimness. Dim flickers of self-righteousness, the lesser lights of the half-hearted satisfactions this world has to offer to fulfil our desires: comfort, security, complacency; self-satisfaction or - promotion, material wealth. And this makes the true light that has come into the world *blinding*.

'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind'.

The Pharisees, blinded by their lust for control, can only see a threat. The man's parents, blinded by their insatiable need to be accepted and affirmed by others, can only see fear. The Pharisees want power, the parents want security, the man born blind *wants to see*. He wants to see. And he does, as he finds glory not in the inadequate lights this world has to offer, but purely and only in the face of Jesus Christ.

During this season of Lent, we are training our eyes to see, we are becoming accustomed to the vision of the Light, that when he shines upon us in Easter glory we will be illuminated in his love and not blinded by his radiance.

Christ's illumination opens our eyes to see the world anew, so that we can, as the man born blind, not only see the Light, but become children of the Light, showing the world what it means to awake

out of darkness; showing the world what it means
to love—to love unto glory.