

The 4th Sunday of Lent (Year A): The Light of Faith & Eternal Life.
1st Reading: 1 Samuel 16 (various verses): David is chosen & anointed;
2nd Reading: Ephesians 5:8-14: from darkness to children of light;
Gospel: John 9:1-41: A blind man gets sight, but Pharisees stay ‘blind’.

The readings this Sunday offer a theme that is dear to Biblical authors: the difference between religious and purely worldly viewpoints. This is expressed well by St Paul in the 2nd Reading: “You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of the light...Wake up from your sleep, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” “Darkness” represents the worldly outlook; the “light” or “shining” stands for the attitude of faith. However, I fear there’s a problem here: for the vast majority of you reading these notes, “the world” is not the nasty thing implied by Biblical authors like St Paul: it is simply the place and way of life where you make your living, bring up your families and have social and work relationships. If we over-egg the pudding by stressing the awfulness of “the world”, many ordinary people will be put off religion for good. That said, we must admit there are serious choices to be made, and it’s when we see what the alternatives are that we realize that evil can creep, almost invisibly, into our lives. I’ll mention some examples near the end of these notes.

But let us look at the first reading. The 1st Book of Samuel tells of the choice of David as leader, to replace that incompetent neurotic, King Saul. The prophet Samuel was sent to choose and anoint one of Jesse’s big squad of sons at Bethlehem; the seven oldest & strongest were presented to him, but God had not chosen any of those. Samuel commented: “God does not see as man sees: man looks at appearances; God looks at the heart.” David, the chosen one, was “a boy of fresh complexion, fine eyes and pleasant bearing” – a nice-looking lad, who would never, in the opinion of “the world”, have been a natural leader. But God did use him: he consolidated the country of Israel, where, 1,000 years later, Jesus Christ was to be born. Later writers saw the choice of David as God’s stepping into human history, as he did later, when Jesus’ foster-father, Joseph (a member of David’s clan) allowed the child to be legally part of David’s inheritance. In that sense, David is like you and me: not considered as ‘super’ by “the world”, we are still used by God to affect others, whom no-one else can reach.

That brings us to the gospel. It’s all of chapter 9, and long! Please try to read it yourself. On a visit to Jerusalem, Jesus met a man blind from birth. The first point Jesus made was to refute the Jewish belief that this was the result of ‘sin’ committed either by the man or his parents. St John uses almost Shakespearean language in making the difference between ‘light’ (= goodness, life, etc) and ‘dark’ (= badness, death, etc) – just like Paul, in the 2nd Reading. But Jesus went further: he told his disciples: “I am the light of the world”. This recalls the 1st chapter of this gospel: “The Word was the true light that enlightens

all men” (1:9). Jesus made a paste with some dust, rubbed it over the man’s eyes, then told him to “wash in the Pool of Siloam”. In this gospel, most details have symbolic meaning, and this would remind Christians of the sacraments – especially Baptism. The man was cured, but that was only the start of the story. He was taken to the Pharisees – members of the party of Scribes & experts on the Jewish Law. They interrogated him on the events, and stated that some sin had been committed, as Jesus had broken the Sabbath by making the paste and doing the healing. Some of them saw Jesus as a sinner; others felt that sinners could not offer ‘signs’ from God like healing. The man himself saw Jesus as “a prophet”.

The Pharisees interviewed the man’s parents, who could offer no help; then they quizzed the man again. He refused to condemn Jesus as a sinner, and (riskily) asked them if they wanted to become Jesus’ followers also! They were furious, and “drove him away” – that means, they expelled him from the synagogue, and from all social & religious aspects of Jewish life - a terrible fate for a Jew. Later, Jesus met the man again; stating his faith in Jesus, he “worshipped him”. The wheel had come full circle: the man, starting off blind, now had physical sight, but he also had faith – spiritual sight – through his ‘washing’. The Pharisees – the so-called religious experts – were spiritually ‘blind’ in their disbelief & cruelty.

The danger for people such as myself in writing this material is to make mountains out of molehills, by exaggerating the “evil” around us. However, as I noted in the first paragraph, we can be led unwittingly into choices that are not good. Church people themselves fell into a moral trap when they gave in to the abuse of children, then when leaders simply ignored the problem, or covered it up. We have paid a heavy price for that. In western society generally, the pursuit of money and pleasure is seen as the main goal of life. We can contrast that with TV interviews of those suffering in Ukraine: there, most people seem to live in stable family relationships, and would be horrified by our loose sexual and gender-fluid culture. Another morally ‘dodgy’ area is high finance. It is obvious that, among the richest in society, many have not played by any moral rules, and appear shocked when they are called to account. All these are areas where Christians have to make decisions, and the “light of Christ” points to a path that many nowadays find very difficult.

If you are reading this, it is not likely that you are morally in “total darkness”! However, if we are honest, it is all too easy to let standards slip, and bit-by-bit, we fall away from “the light”. The 2nd half of Lent is a time to think about this, and try to put things right.

Fr Jim Dunne.