

Today's readings speak to our experiences; each one resonates with our humanity.

**1 Samuel 16.1-13**

*The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.*

David is like an afterthought; he's the youngest, the least important- and yet he is chosen to be the next king. We can all remember what it felt like when we were young to be left out: not chosen for the sports team, or the choir, or the birthday party invitation.... Do we still feel left out sometimes? Who do we leave out? Many centuries later, Jesus would say 'the last shall be first' .....

**Psalm 23**

*The Lord is my shepherd:  
therefore can I lack nothing.  
He will make me lie down in green pastures:  
and lead me beside still waters.  
He will refresh my soul:  
and guide me in right pathways for his name's sake.  
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil:  
for you are with me, your rod and your staff comfort me.  
You spread a table before me  
in the face of those who trouble me:  
you have anointed my head with oil,  
and my cup shall be full.  
Surely your goodness and loving-kindness  
will follow me all the days of my life:  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Psalm 23: So well known, reminding us of funerals and of looking to God for comfort when we are in a dark valley of despair. No wonder we love this psalm; the green pastures, still waters, rest and comfort call to us. At uncertain, strange time we yearn for God's love to lead and protect us.

### **Ephesians 5.8-14**

*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light — for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.*

*Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*

*Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.*

*For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly;*

*but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,*

*for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,*

*'Sleeper, awake!*

*Rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.'*

"Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light." Wow.

Thing is, before I knew Jesus I didn't FEEL as though I was darkness, or in the dark.

It's only when I look back to my life BC- Before Christ- that I can see that I was stumbling around in the dark; or to use another of Jesus' metaphors, like a sheep without a shepherd. I didn't know what I was missing, although I was sometimes vaguely aware that I was missing something. How many people attempt to find what's missing in all the wrong places, trying to fill the emptiness with possessions or by abusing alcohol or drugs? Or even with so-called good things, like work or sport or travel? The people who have filled their cupboards and pantries with goods they may never need- are they attempting to calm their fears with an illusion of control?

Try to imagine how it might feel to be born blind- literally in the dark, all the time.

### **John 9.1-41**

*As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.' They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.' The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age.'*

*He will speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him.’ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, ‘Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.’ He answered, ‘I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.’ They said to him, ‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.*

Many commentators make a connection between what happens in this story and what was happening to the community the gospel writer was addressing. John’s community of Christians may well have been thrown out of the synagogue- because they went too far, saying that Jesus was the Messiah, the one that all the scriptures pointed to.

The man born blind was driven out of the synagogue; even his parents were too afraid of that happening to them to speak up for him.

How would this passage have spoken to John’s community? How might it have addressed their feelings? How might it help us when we feel alone or rejected?

The story begins with the disciples asking Jesus who had sinned- the man born blind, or his parents? Jesus undermines the common understanding of the day, which was that disability, illness and poverty were the result of sin; and conversely, good health and wealth were the result of Godliness. If you were rich and well, you must be a good person; if you were poor or disabled or diseased, you must be a bad person. Jesus turns that idea on its head.

When the Pharisees say that Jesus can’t be from God because he healed on the sabbath, they presumed that he must be a sinner who didn’t know the Law.

So if you knew the Law and scrupulously obeyed it, you must be a good and Godly person; conversely, if you disobeyed the Law (as they interpreted it) you must be a bad person, a sinner.

How do we define sin today? Do we judge others to be good or bad people, saints or sinners, and if we do- what criteria do we use? Jesus subverted the wisdom of his time; perhaps some of the standards by which we judge others also need to be challenged.

The man born blind received his sight. He didn’t know how it happened, he couldn’t explain it; he said, “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

Many Christians have been inspired by this simple confession. One was John Newton, who was a slave trader who became an abolitionist once Jesus had opened his eyes; he wrote the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’. Have we had an experience of new light, a sense of new life, of being given a new chance to be the person we are called to be?

Every day is an opportunity for a new beginning. Every day we can open our hearts a bit more, so that God can pour in more new light. Every day we can look for joy in creation, in each other, and find ways to be kind and generous and loving.

The services of Morning Prayer for each day of the week contain this prayer:

*The night has passed and the day lies open before us; let us pray with one heart and mind. As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and for ever. Amen.*

In this season of Lent, as we journey with Jesus to the cross and beyond, may we be prepared to risk everything-as he did- and have our hearts set alight with love for God. Let us live as children of light, bringing light to the world, sharing the Good News of the one who opened our eyes.

In this season of Covid-19, of self-isolation and social distancing, as we journey along untrod paths, as so many are fearful, and as we want so much to hold each other close- and yet we can't- we ask our God to hold us and love us always.

The Lord be with you.

\*\*\*\*\*

Keep us, good Lord,  
under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your  
love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you taught us to love our neighbour,  
and to care for those in need  
as if we were caring for you.  
In this time of anxiety, give us strength  
to comfort the fearful, to tend the sick,  
and to assure the isolated  
of our love, and your love,  
for your name's sake.

God of compassion,  
be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation.  
In their loneliness, be their consolation;  
in their anxiety, be their hope;  
in their darkness, be their light;

through him who suffered alone on the cross,  
but reigns with you in glory,  
Jesus Christ our Lord.

**For those who are ill**

Merciful God,  
we entrust to your tender care  
those who are ill or in pain,  
knowing that whenever danger threatens  
your everlasting arms are there to  
hold them safe.  
Comfort and heal them,  
and restore them to health and strength;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**For hospital staff and medical researchers**

Gracious God,  
give skill, sympathy and resilience  
to all who are caring for the sick,  
and your wisdom to those searching for a cure.  
Strengthen them with your Spirit,  
that through their work many will be restored to  
health;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**