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**Sunday 19th March**

**The Fourth Sunday of Lent**

**The Rev’d Dr Alex Clare-Young**

**Scripture Sentences: Psalm 23**

God is my shepherd, **I shall not want.**

They enable me to lie down in green pastures; **they guide me beside still waters;**

God restores my soul, **guiding me in directions that honour their name.**

Even though I walk through the rockiest valley, **I am not afraid for God is with me;**

God prepares an open table, and anoints our heads, **our cups overflow.**

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

**and I shall dwell in the house of God my whole life long.**

*Paraphrase by Alex Clare-Young*

**Call To Worship**

God says: “I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?” **We open our hearts and minds to perceive God’s action all around us.**

God says that: “I do not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but I look on the heart. **We open our hearts and minds to perceive God’s likeness in other people.**

Jesus says, “But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.” **I open my heart and mind to mystery, to grace, to non-judgment, to the gifts of those who experience the world differently than me.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

God, our creator, we are so thankful

that you do not perceive as we perceive,

that you experience the world differently,

that you know our hearts and minds,

that you undermine the judgments and stereotypes

that are so prevalent in this world.

Sometimes we ask the wrong questions,

We take a moment hold our questions before you in the quiet

*silence*

Sometimes we seek the wrong answers,

We take a moment to shake off our need for certainty, just for now.

*silence*

Sometimes we seek to assume your judgment of others,

We take a moment to dwell in the mystery of grace

*silence*

The good news is that God does not see as mortals see but, instead, looks on our hearts.

Thanks be to God, **Amen.**

**A Prayer for Illumination**

*Some of us sense through sight, through touch, through taste, through smell, through sound. Some of us experience sightlessness, numbness, a loss or change of taste or smell, deafness. God knows all that is created and calls us good, just as we are.*

Open our hearts to perceive your Word in our own, unique, ways; engaging with the world around us, and sharing the particular ways in which we perceive you, our environment, and the people we meet, generously with each other. Amen.

**Readings**

*1 Samuel 16:1-13* | *St John 9:1-41*

**Sermon Notes**

When reading these passages, this time, the thought that struck me was that they are **asking the wrong questions.**

*1 Samuel*

* Samuel meets with Jesse and his sons to discern which of them is being called by God to be anointed, to lead.
* First, Samuel asks the wrong questions.
	+ He looks at Eliab and asks whether his appearance is fitting for the role to which Samuel is making an appointment.
	+ God says that this is the wrong question: ‘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."’
	+ He is not to judge by outward appearance, by stereotyping (as people do). He is to look to the person’s heart – their internal identity, qualities, motives, etc.
* Then Jesse asks the wrong questions: continuing to send out those of his sons that are popular in his community, that are judged well by outward appearance, by stereotyping, by norms.
* The right question is: ‘What is in this person’s heart?’
* God chooses David.
	+ David who ‘was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome’. David who plays the harp. David who is later to be in a relationship of covenant with Jonathan. David who was, perhaps, seen as weak, as stereotypically feminine, as unpopular in relation to the cultural norms that he was subject to.
* And so David is anointed in the presence of his brothers, who were put before him.
* To put into today’s contemporary context:
	+ Who do we stereotype and judge by appearance?
	+ What cultural norms have the Church subjected folks to?
	+ How do we choose our leadership? How can we ensure we are asking the right questions?

*St John*

* In an encounter with a blind man, so many people are asking the wrong questions.
* Jesus’s followers wrongly ask who sinned:
	+ *9:2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 9:3 Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.* ‘Who sinned?’ is the wrong question.
	+ Perhaps they should have asked ‘What is God showing me through this person?’ We are still asking the wrong question. We still focus on supposed sins. Let’s ask instead, ‘What is God showing me through this person?’
* The man’s neighbours wrongly ask if the man is a beggar and refuse to listen to his answers.
	+ *9:8 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?" 9:9 Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."* Perhaps they should have asked ‘Who are you?’ and believed the answer. We are still asking the wrong question. We focus on our assumptions instead of respecting/believing who people say they are. Let’s ask instead, ‘Who are you?’ and listen well.
* After repeated questioning, religious leaders wrongly ask him, yet again, what Jesus did and how.
	+ *9:26 They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"*
	+ *9:27 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?"*
	+ He suggests that the right question is not about what Jesus did, but about whether they will follow him.
	+ We are still asking the wrong question. We still look for ‘the historical Jesus so that we can prove others wrong.
	+ Let’s ask instead, ‘How can we follow Jesus by acting like him?’
* When Jesus suggests that the religious leaders are spiritually blind, they ask the wrong question again:
	+ *9:40 Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"*
	+ *9:41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.*
	+ This takes us right back to the beginning. When we ask who has sinned, when we judge others, we are spiritually blind. When we accept our own inability to judge correctly, and acknowledge the mysteries of faith, then our spiritual eyes are wide open.
* Personally, I would focus on the Gospel reading on this case, referencing the ‘wrong questions’ in the 1 Samuel passage briefly. You could, however, go for the other way round! Both readings are rich and deep.

*Disability Theology*

* It is important to remember that any focus on physical healing can be harmful to those who are disabled. Consider listening to blind people as they celebrate the gifts, as well as the challenges of being blind.
* You may wish to consider using this video, or looking for other resources created by blind people, in which they share their stories: <https://www.rnib.org.uk/our-campaigns/see-the-person/>
* In the video, Ava, who has experienced sight loss, says: “I can still do me things, just differently”. RNIB’s tagline is ‘see differently’. The campaign this video is from is ‘see the person, not the sight loss’.
* You may wish to use braille as a multisensory activity/aid. You can buy braille flashcards, toys, and games online or recreate them yourself.
* Consider perspectives from disability theology: In his seminal text, ‘In the beginning there was darkness’, John Hull, a blind theologian, offers the following insights: Hull makes the point that the Bible was written by sighted people and for sighted people and blind or partially sighted people need to understand this as they read the text, otherwise, they will feel alienated. For instance, the Bible often depicts blindness as the result of sin (Deuteronomy 28:28-29); or describes it as one particular form of punishment from God; or that God causes people to be blind to achieve some, perhaps obtuse, end for himself (John 9:1-2). Or perhaps most commonly, blindness, even though used as metaphor for spiritual ignorance, carries over this stigma to those who are physically blind (67). See Matthew 6:22-23 for instance. You can feel Hull wince, in the last chapter of the book, as he describes how Jesus uses the word blind to talk about his opponents the Pharisees: “You blind fools...” or “How blind you are!” etc. Then he asks, if Jesus came to heal the blind and if that is the chief thing we see him doing in his ministry, could a blind person actually become a disciple (159-160)? Hull calls his blindness “a strange, dark, and mysterious gift from God” (47). Consider how you might incorporate Hull’s insights into your sermon.

**Prayers for Ourselves and Others**

Holy One, your Strange ways, they astound us.

Among the mighty, your Wisdom is called foolish.

While others assert their power with force,

Yours unfolds like an invitation.

You never resort to weapons.

You turn from all paths of domination.

Beauty and truth are your means of persuasion.

Freedom is your promise.

While empire shouts false promises of security, using fear to turn us against each other,

You whisper things of vulnerability, of meals at table and sharing what we have,

of solidarity and new life.

When you, the Sacred, took on flesh, You sought neither thrones nor prestige,

but made your friends among the outcast.

Sex workers. The imprisoned. The hungry and the ill. The fed up and the weary.

Though you were presented with every opportunity

to seek importance among the elite,

to the end, you choose the edges,

making your home among the vulnerable,

living in solidarity with the criminalized and despised.

We hope to be strange like you.

Strangers to all that normalizes evil,

to power that corrupts, to practices that demean or neglect.

Make us faithful to the peculiar calling of Christ.

Unafraid to bear the names of the despised.

Firmly planted in the confidence of your Holy Mystery –

the strange love that calls us to fight with and for each other,

and awakens us to the joy you set before us.

*The Rev’d M Jade Kaiser, Enfleshed*

**Offertory**

Let’s take a moment to offer our authentic selves, gifts, and thoughts to God…

God, we offer up all that we are, and all that we are not

all that we have and all that we have not

all that we know and all that we know not

that you might bless these gifts to the questions and practices

that embody you in this world. Amen.

**Blessing**

As we move on from this time and space let’s seek the foolishness

to ask the revealing questions and to challenge limiting norms.

As we move on from this time and space

we know that we go with the blessing of God,

Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Amen.

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| Hymn Suggestions |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| When listening prophets dare to speak |  |  | 163 |  |
| Dear Lord and Father of Mankind | 492 | 485 | 495 | 111 |
| When the Tears Fall  |  |  |  | 1189 |
| When the Music Fades |  |  | 437 | 1016 |
| Called by Christ to Be Disciples |  |  | 660 |  |

Hymns Which Explore Darkness In A Positive Way

*(you’ll need a One Licence to reproduce words)*

*Darkness Is A Gift of God* A new hymn by David Bjorlin. Meter is 7676D

<https://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/darkness-is-a-gift-of-god-pdf-d1010110>

*Holy Darkness, Blessed Night* by Dan Schutte SJ (after St John of the Cross) http://cdn.ocp.org/shared/pdf/preview/22206z1.pdf

*Joyful is the Dark, Holy, Hidden God* by Brian Wren

<https://hymnary.org/text/joyful_is_the_dark_holy_hidden_god>

*In A Deep Unbounded Darkness* by Mary Louise Bringle,

tune Divinum Mysterium (Of the Father’s Love Begotten)

<https://hymnary.org/hymn/LUYH2013/page/44>