

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year A

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

ACNA Readings – 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:1-14; John 9:1-41.

Introduction. The Fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally called Laetare Sunday, which is the Latin word for “rejoice.” It is meant to be a day of celebration within the otherwise austere period of Lent. In some parts of the Anglican Communion, it is also called Mothering Sunday. The Mothering aspect has historically been applied in different ways. First, to honour Mary, the mother of Jesus. Second, to encourage congregants to return to their home (*mother*) church if they were living outside the parish, and in so doing re-uniting families. Third – it changed during the mid-twentieth century – to honouring mothers. Any of these aspects are reasons to rejoice. However, there is no greater reason to rejoice than the revelation that Jesus is both the Good Shepherd and the Son of Man, foretold of old in the Hebrew Scriptures, and what’s more, he is also the Light of the world.

Common Theme. The 1 Samuel reading deals with the choosing of a real-life shepherd to be king, with a lesson not to judge outward appearances for God looks at the heart. Psalm 23 goes further and describes God as a shepherd – a good one – who protects, provides and guides. Paul reminds the believers in the church at Ephesus to be in the world but not of the world, putting on display the light of Messiah Jesus. In John’s gospel, darkness is also a theme, but in relation to blindness. Jesus displays for all to see that not only is he the Good Shepherd – who heals a man born blind – but he is the Son of Man.

1 Samuel 16:1-13. Height matters – or so it seems – not only in ancient times but also in the present. Voters tend to view taller people as being more suited to leadership.¹ Male Fortune 500 chief executive officers are almost ten times more likely to be 6ft 2ins (188cm) or taller, compared to the average American man.² Erik Lindqvist has demonstrated a strong correlation between height and the likelihood of achieving managerial positions.³ The more things change, the more they stay the same. King Saul is described as “an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others” (1 Sam 9:2). Having clamoured to have a king like the surrounding nations (1 Sam 8), God gives them what they want, a tall, impressive figure of a man. The prophet Samuel anoints Saul as king (1 Sam 10:1). But the integrity of the heart is far more important than physical stature to God, and King Saul fails to impress.

God rejects Saul as king (1 Sam 15) and in today’s passage, Samuel must seek out another one. God narrows down the search area by telling him to go to Jesse of Bethlehem (v. 1). Samuel gets to scrutinise Jesse’s sons. Eliab must have cut an impressive figure, because Samuel thinks, “Surely the LORD’S anointed stands here before the LORD” (v. 6). Yet God comes straight out to tell Samuel not to consider Eliab’s appearance and especially his height (v. 7). Then, most wonderfully and

¹ Nic Fleming, “Voters View Tall People as Better Suited for Leadership”, *The Guardian* (18 October 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/oct/18/voters-tall-politicians-leadership> (Accessed 2 March 2023)

² Nic Fleming, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/oct/18/voters-tall-politicians-leadership>

³ Erik Lindqvist, “Height and Leadership”, *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol.94 (2012), 1191-1196.

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profoundly God says to Samuel, “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (v. 7).

Sufficiently chastised, Samuel proceeds to look at the rest of Jesse's gathered sons through God's eyes and nobody makes the grade. He asks Jesse if he has any more sons and is told that there is one more, the youngest, David, but he is busy tending the sheep (v. 11). David appears before Samuel and interestingly – given what God had just said – is described as being “ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features” (v. 12). Samuel does not leap to anoint him based on his fine outward appearance, but only does so when God – seeing David's heart – says to Samuel “rise and anoint him, he is the one” (v. 13). This was to fulfil what Samuel said to King Saul that “the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart...” (1 Sam 13:14). In giving a summary of Israel's history, the apostle Paul says “After removing Saul, he [God] made David their king. He testified concerning him: ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do’” (Acts 13:22). David profoundly loved and studied the Torah; he was reverent and trusting, humble and repentant, and above all continually loved God. Despite David's multiple transgressions – including adultery and murder – his heart remained orientated towards God and God was gracious towards David.

A twofold challenge arises from this passage:

1. to look at others through the eyes of God, not judging their outward appearance (and actions?) but seeking their heart and
2. to look at ourselves through those very same eyes to ask if our hearts are ‘after the heart of God’?

Both are difficult in different ways.

Psalm 23. This is a beautiful pastoral Psalm. It is read throughout the seasons in daily prayers, at Eucharists, at funerals, and features heavily during Lent. It is a Psalm that frames God as a Good Shepherd and gives the promise of his presence no matter what. The idea of God being a good shepherd looms large in the narrative of the prophets where the leaders of Israel are likened to shepherds. This draws on an ancient metaphor in the Middle East for rulers being shepherds, with some being depicted in art and pottery with a shepherd's crook of sorts. However, many of Israel's great patriarchs and rulers literally started out shepherding flocks, not people – think Abraham (Gen 13), Jacob (Gen 30), Moses (Exod 3) and King David (1 Sam 16). Later on, God used shepherd imagery to frame the abuses of power that characterised some of Israel's leaders.

Jeremiah speaks of God gathering the remnant of his flock back together and raising “up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land”, whose name will mean ‘The LORD Our Righteous Saviour’” (Jer 23:5-6). God, through Ezekiel, ushers a strong warning against the leaders of that time and promises to seek the lost sheep, lead them to green pastures, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak (Ezek 34). Yet again, a Messianic link is made with a decedent of David with God saying, “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd” (Ezek 34: 23). When King

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Herod – a particularly cruel shepherd/leader over Israel – hears about the alleged birth of the Messiah he consults the chief priests and scribes on where the Messiah will be born (Matt 2:1-6) and they quote from Micah 5:2: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

Jesus not only teaches that the character of God is like a good shepherd who seeks the lost sheep (Matt 18:12–14, Luke 15:3–7); he also claims to be the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11-18). The Good Shepherd in Psalm 23 brings about rest (v. 2) and restoration (v. 3). He guides (v. 3) and protects (v. 4). This leads to reconciliation – v. 5 alludes to a ritual of reconciliation around a table – and abundant life – “my cup overflows”. The final promise is one of presence – dwelling in the house of the Lord forever (v. 6). Messiah Jesus embodies all of this.

Ephesians 5:1-14. The passage begins by exhorting believers to be imitators of God (v. 1). This is not a new idea introduced to the followers of Jesus, but an ancient biblical principle. From Genesis, we learn that humanity is made in the image of God and is meant to reflect that image to and within God's creation. As God reveals himself through the Hebrew Scriptures to be a personal God – as opposed to a dim and distant deity like the ancient gods – God constantly restates his desire that “you will be my people, and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7, Lev 26:12, Ezek 11:20, 14:11, 34:31, 36:28, 37:23, 37:27, Zech 8:8, Jer 7:23, 11:4, 30:22, 31:1, 31:33, 32:38). With this comes great responsibility, not the least is to walk in God's way and to keep God's commands. In Leviticus 11:45, God reminds the people that he is their God, who brought them out of Egypt, and says therefore they must “be holy, for I am holy.” If being the people of God was not motivation enough to imitate God, Paul adds that we do this because we are dearly loved children. So in light of this clear expectation to be imitators of a holy, loving God, Paul spells out the negative - what this does not look like (vv. 3-7).

In case we missed his argument, Paul contrasts living in the light as opposed to darkness (v. 8). This is an important theme in Scripture, rabbinic tradition and even the Jewish sect, the Essenes. God is light; God's word brings light – both that word spoken in the very beginning in Gen 1:3 and also Torah – and God intends his people to be a light unto the nations. Several psalms and prophets speak to this: for example, Psalm 18:28; 27:1; 119:105; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6.

In rabbinic tradition, the ancient rabbis compared Moses to a light:

To what may Moses be compared at that time? To a light which is set upon a lamp stand from which many lights are ignited. Nothing is lacking from this light in the same way as nothing was lacking in the wisdom of Moses.⁴

Jesus taught his disciples to be shining lights, saying:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it

⁴ *Sifre Num 93* quoted in Brad Young, *Paul, The Jewish Theologian: A Pharisee among Christians, Jews, and Gentiles* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 100.

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gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven (Matt 5:14-16).

But not all claims to the light are equal. The Jewish sect called the Essenes saw themselves as the true sons of light who were divinely chosen and would inherit the whole world while the sons of darkness – including the rest of Israel, the Gentiles, and the demonic powers who ruled the world – would be annihilated.⁵ The Essenes withdrew from the perceived darkness of the world and cut themselves off as much as possible. Jesus takes a dig at the Essenes, using their labels when he says in Luke 16:8 that the sons of this world are wiser in dealing with their generation than the sons of light.⁶

Quite radically, Jesus claims to be the light. He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12) and again, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (John 9:5). In fact, John makes this profound argument from the very beginning when he writes, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). He promotes the principle from of old, that of followers coming into the light and walking in the light of the Word. In so doing, those who believe that Jesus is the light of the world become themselves children of light (John 12: 36). The Apostle Paul – against this rabbinic and cultural understanding of living in the light, with the added significance of Jesus claiming to be the light of the world – therefore says in Ephesians 5:8-10:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

And while Paul also says to have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness (v. 11), this must be understood and held in tension with Jesus' own command for his followers to be salt and light – to be present and infusing the very thing that is decaying – or is in darkness – with the presence of the Messiah. To use the often-quoted phrase, followers of Messiah Jesus are to be in the world but not of the world. After all, what good is a lamp to those floundering in the darkness if it is placed under a bowl?

John 9:1-41. Chapter nine of John's Gospel is one passage among many that are typically used to advance anti-Jewish prejudice. Jesus heals a man (v. 1-8). Everyone is amazed but the Pharisees investigate it and dispute the miracle (v. 9-34). Jesus confronts the Pharisees with their spiritual blindness (v. 35-41). In short, there is very little nuance in the basic narrative regarding the Pharisees even when it is evident in the text (v. 16) – is it all Pharisees or some Pharisees, and if some, was it representative of the division between the schools of Hillel and Shammai that was so prevalent at the time? (There are examples of other Pharisees who came to follow Jesus and even defend him and his

⁵ David Flusser & R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 66.

⁶ Flusser & Notley, 68.

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followers.) Worse still, the spiritual blindness of *some* of the Pharisees is sometimes ascribed by preachers to ALL Jews, both past and present, conveniently forgetting that the early Jesus movement was almost entirely made up of Jewish people.

Dr Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg in his book *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, King of All Israel* demonstrates that the Gospel of John is not an anti-Jewish, but a thoroughly Jewish book. He argues that Jesus' healing of the blind man in this passage is not simply a healing but speaks of the creation of a new man – speaking to God having created man from the dust in Gen 2:7 – and is in keeping with John's attempt throughout his Gospel to show Jesus to be God.⁷ Lizorkin-Eyzenberg says of the healing and the subsequent investigation:

It was up to the formerly blind man to report what he thought about the man who had healed him. But it was not so simple. The side that did not approve of Jesus was far more powerful than the group among the Pharisees who loved him. Therefore, the predominant reaction and subsequent questioning of the man who had been blind was overwhelmingly negative.⁸

This positions Jesus to have a confrontation with *some* of the Pharisees who are resisting his claim to be the Son of Man – something the healed man has accepted (v. 38). Lizorkin-Eyzenberg notes that the Son of Man in Jewish theological writings is characterized by utter righteousness and quotes from Enoch 71:14-17:

“This is the Son of Man who is born unto righteousness; and righteousness abides over him, and the righteousness of the Head of Days forsakes him not. And he said unto me: ‘He proclaims unto thee peace in the name of the world to come; for from hence has proceeded peace since the creation of the world, and so shall it be unto thee forever and for ever and ever.’”⁹

Jesus has taken an initial question by his disciples about whose sin caused the man to be blind (v. 2) and answered an entirely different question with a massive reveal that Lizorkin-Eyzenberg describes as Jesus demonstrating he has come “to judge the kosmos by giving sight to the blind and showing those who think they can see, that they themselves are blind.” This judgement is not something purely negative. Lizorkin-Eyzenberg describes the Son of Man's righteous judgment as:

in essence, restoring/enforcing the rightful place of all that is good, righteous, and praiseworthy in God's creation. It is affirming, strengthening, and declaring praiseworthy that which is right before God.¹⁰

This is the lesson Jesus is driving home to his disciples, to the blind man and the Pharisees – both those who are for him and even those who are against him.

⁷ Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, King of All Israel* (Jewish Studies for Christians, 2015), 217-218.

⁸ Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, 219.

⁹ Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, 222.

¹⁰ Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, 224.

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