

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT – 30TH March 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Our readings today deal with contrasts: that between light and darkness, between sight and blindness, between outward appearance and inner reality. Lent focuses on the baptismal themes of conversion from the old to the new, from darkness to light, from death to life. Samuel is sent by God to select a new king to replace Saul. As the sons of Jesse pass before him, he thinks he's looking at the one who's the Lord's anointed. But God warns him, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature . . . for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 26:7).

We heard from the letter to the Ephesians: "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8).

Then today's Gospel shows up the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees in contrast to the physical blindness of the man healed by Jesus who says, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5).

Of course, having been baptised, having been brought from darkness to light, doesn't mean we're never going to wander off into darkness again. Spiritual blindness is a constant danger. We're creatures of habit and we develop ways of living our lives that work for us and feel comfortable but it's possible they're doing us harm without our knowing it. Sometimes the consequences of that can be fairly benign, sometimes serious.

For years, a particular chemical substance was used for insulation and construction. It was durable, inexpensive and fireproof. It also was a serious health hazard. It was called by the Greek word for "inextinguishable" or "indestructible" – asbestos. We can think of any number of other things that we have come to realise are either harmful or not the best option.

When I was working as a retail supervisor, there was a phenomenon called 'store blindness'. The department store floor was laid out in a certain way. The fixtures were arranged in a certain way. There were various displays and so on. And one got used to the way things were and thought they looked pretty good. Until a visit was paid to another store and the contrast between your department and that of another store became apparent. Suddenly things didn't look so good. We become 'blind' to our environment. Being taken out of that comfort zone gives you a new perspective which enables you to make positive and creative changes.

The same is true in most areas of life. We become used to the way things are and become blind to the ways in which our lives have become stultified and shrunken. One of the values of trips away is the new perspective we're given on life. This is also part of the Christian understanding of pilgrimage. We saw that in the film *The Way* here in the Cathedral a few weeks ago.

Lent is a little pilgrimage. We turn again from darkness to light. We examine our spiritual commitment, including our financial stewardship.

One of the blind spots we have as Australian Anglicans is the subject of money. A former bishop of this Diocese, the Rt Revd Ian Shevill, when he was Bishop of North Queensland, wrote an autobiographical

book called *Half Time*. He made this same observation about the reticence to mention money. He took a trip to America where he discovered a different culture and approach to the subject of money in the church. Their far more up-front and open discussion of finances challenged him. He was asked directly about his own giving habits. He writes in the book, "If he had asked after my acne I could not have been more embarrassed because I had always thought that a silver coin was all that the collection plate required" (Ian Shevill, *Half Time*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, pp. 68-69). What he learned there radically changed his understanding of financial stewardship.

One of the major reasons for our reluctance to talk about financial stewardship is a false understanding of what happens when we place our gift in the offertory plate or have it transferred electronically or whatever method we choose, is that we think we are saying 'goodbye' to the gift. 'Well there that goes.' We think we're depleted by giving; that we now have less for other things we'd rather use the money for. It's a deficit mindset. We're like the little boy who was asked by his Sunday school teacher, "Now where do little boys and girls who don't place their money in the collection plate go?" One little boy answered, "They go to the movies." This much for God means so much less for me.

Rather than focus on the practical needs of the church, let's just think for a moment about the blessings and benefits of stewardship. Now here we may be getting a bit nervous, for two reasons. First, we don't want to be pressured and have the hard sell put upon us. There are clergy who are good at that.

There's a story of two men who were shipwrecked on a desert island. One of them was a panicky type who was overcome by fear. "We're going to die. We'll never survive this." The other was quite calm and said, "Don't worry; my income is \$100,000 a week." That didn't help the other man at all. "What good is that? We're on an island with no food, no fresh water. Your money's useless here! We're going to die." "No, no, you don't get it" the other man answered. "I make \$100,000 a week. I give ten per cent of it to my church. Believe me, my minister will find me!"

Secondly, we're aware of the extreme emphasis given to this by some sections of the Christian Church. They say God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy and if our faith is strong enough, and if we give generously, usually to their particular ministry, we'll be rewarded financially. All we have to do is claim it in the name of Jesus. Known variously as prosperity theology, or the health and wealth gospel, or name-it-and-claim-it or confess-it-and possess-it or blab-it-and-grab-it.

But because some have gone overboard in emphasizing a particular aspect of Christian teaching doesn't mean we need go to the other extreme in reaction against it. The fact is there are benefits of generous giving. Being a Christian carries many blessings. But our faith is not a guarantee of protection from all harm and suffering. The suffering of the cross precedes resurrection. Jesus walks with us through our suffering.

He also said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38).

So what are some of the benefits of giving financially to God's work? For one thing, it affirms our trust in God's provision. Moses was commanded to remind the Israelites to trust God so thoroughly that they set aside one day in seven to worship him, and one tenth of their income to be given back. These were

expressions of their dedication of *all* they owned to God, recognising that God gave it to them in the first place.

This is affirmed by Jesus who warns his followers not to place inordinate emphasis on material wealth, but to “store up for yourselves treasure in heaven For where your treasure is there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:20-21).

A second benefit or blessing of giving is peace and security. Jesus goes on to warn people not to allow anxiety about material needs to sabotage our faith in God’s providence or to live selfishly toward others. Today as we commit ourselves to another year of stewardship, we are actively placing our trust in God’s providence. And that gives peace and a sense of security.

Another blessing is that it serves as a guard against material things becoming idols. Rudyard Kipling was lecturing a class at McGill University to avoid making an obsession of money, power and fame. He said one day they would meet someone who wasn’t concerned about such things and they’d realise how poor they really were.

We are on the brink of a wonderful time here at the Cathedral. God is calling us to be a part of that. More than ever the city, the region, the world needs the gospel we have to proclaim. Our stewardship is an investment in the future. Giving to the work of God through this Cathedral carries enormous blessings and rewards now and in the future.

Finally, generous giving creates a culture of joy. I think the reason so many churches are miserable is that they’re just stingy. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “...the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

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