

Lent 4 A 2008 St Mary Magdalen (Fr Michael's 80<sup>th</sup> b-day)

Readings: 1 Sam 1.6-7,10-13; Eph 5.8-14; John 9.1-41

Look at the people around you: who do you see? Some people you know well, some you know less well, and some you don't know at all. But how deeply do you see into even those you think you know well? For that matter, how deeply do you see into yourself?

In today's gospel the Jews – and John lumps them together as a collective whole – see the blind man healed. They see Jesus who healed him. But they refuse to believe what they see. The man couldn't really have been born blind; Jesus couldn't really have given him sight. They saw what they thought they saw; but they were blind to what had really happened. Still more were they blind to who Jesus really was. That's why the sting of today's gospel is in its tail: "For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind" - not of course physically, but spiritually: Jesus is talking about spiritual insight. The Pharisees thought they knew the truth about God: they thought they had insight into who God was and how God worked. Jesus told them they lacked that insight; if they had had it, then they would have seen God at work in Jesus.

John's story of the healing of the man born blind is about spiritual insight, it's about spiritual enlightenment. Light is an image used in many religions to speak of goodness, just as darkness is a symbol of evil. In his first letter John says that God himself is light: 'This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1.5). God is perfect goodness; and in the same letter John defines that goodness, that light, more precisely when he says simply, 'God is love' (1 John 4).

At the heart of John's gospel, and at the heart of Christian faith, is the belief that God is light and love; and this faith rests on the insight the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have given us into God's character, God's nature. In his ministry Jesus displays the love of God by healing the

disease of human bodies, and curing the sickness of human souls. He reveals the love of God in his dying, giving himself willingly for the sake of his creation. He makes that love plain too in his resurrection, bringing life out of death, and sharing that life with all who believe in him. For those with eyes to see, for those gifted by the Spirit with spiritual insight, the love of God, the light of God, is embodied in Jesus.

Today's scripture readings combine those Johannine images of God with another, more down to earth. The first reading tells of the call of David the shepherd lad. At the Lord's bidding Samuel anoints him to be king in the place of Saul. But for the Old Testament the true king of Israel, the true shepherd of his people, is God himself. Today's responsorial psalm, Psalm 23, is the best-known expression of that theme, a theme that runs through the Old Testament and on into the New. In St John's gospel Jesus heals the man born blind in chapter 9, and then in chapter 10 goes on to speak of himself as the good shepherd. That image too is an image of the self-giving love which God is: the good shepherd freely lays down his life for the sheep; and in so dying, he brings his Father's sheep safely into the fold of eternal life, the fold of the light and love of God.

From the beginning Christians have applied the image of the shepherd not only to God and his human embodiment, Jesus, but also to those who like David have been anointed to serve as priests and pastors in the divine sheepfold of the church. Men and women are ordained to be walking sacraments of the loving care of God for his people and for his world. Priests are ordained to proclaim the light of the gospel; in their pastoral ministry in church and world they're called to embody the light and love which God himself is. Like David, we ordained priests are bound to fall short of our calling. But we remain sacraments of the love and light of God; and as sacraments we exist to point people to the only source of true light and true love, and so deepen their spiritual insight into the truth of God and the truth about themselves.

Among the walking sacraments who have devoted themselves to the pastoral ministry entrusted to them by ordination is Father Michael. He has exercised Christ's ministry in the church for fifty years – he was ordained

deacon in 1958. You would therefore expect him to be older than fifty; and indeed, as you know, last Friday he celebrated a birthday. But like Frederic, the pirate apprentice in ‘The Pirates of Penzance’ Fr Michael had the good fortune to be born on 29 February. [I was glad to see from Parish Notes that Fr Peter is also a devotee of Gilbert and Sullivan]. So last Friday was his twentieth birthday, though for some reason he thinks he’s eighty. He was trained at St Stephen’s House in an exacting school of priestly ministry. He served in stipendiary ministry for 37 years, and has continued his ministry, not least in this parish, since he retired in 1995 – ‘retired’ of course in inverted commas: just as old soldiers never die, neither do old priests ever retire. So today we celebrate with Fr. Michael and Jenny the beginning of his sixth decade of ministry and his ninth of life, and thank him for his pastoral, sacramental ministry among us. As we of the East say on these occasions, ‘May you live for many years!’ Happily the tradition of priestly ministry Fr Michael embodies is still alive and well in the younger priests who serve you in this parish.

Priests may be shepherds who proclaim the light and love of God. It doesn’t follow that the flock they serve is to be sheepish - even biblical images have their limits. That’s clear in another application of the image of light in today’s second reading: ‘...once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord’, says the Letter to the Ephesians. Christ reveals God as light; and we who belong to Christ share in his light. That’s why those who are baptised are given a candle lit from the Easter candle with the words: ‘This is to show that you have passed from darkness into light: shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.’

No less than ordained priests, all we baptised priests share in the priesthood of Christ himself. ‘You’, says the first letter of Peter to the newly-baptised, ‘you are... a royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2.9). We’re all to embody in ourselves the light and love of God that Jesus embodied in himself; we’re all to be sacraments of the pastoral care of God for his creation; we’re all to embody the goodness of God in our own living. What we receive from God through Christ, we are to pass on to others. God gives us the Spirit of Christ to enlighten us, to give us spiritual insight, to see God at work in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – and to let the light

and love of God transform the way we think, the way we react, and the way we behave.

That is of course as much a vocation as a reality. 'Now you are light in the Lord', says the Letter to the Ephesians. But it continues, 'be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth'. When we look at the people around us, and, still more importantly, when we look into ourselves, we see people who are not yet complete goodness, light and truth: there are still some dark corners within us. Enlightenment takes time; and as Lent reminds us, it also takes spiritual effort; for it comes as we learn to follow Christ more closely, give ourselves in the service of divine love more fully, and let the divine light shine from us more brightly. But if we look deep into others, and deep into ourselves, with the insight Christ gives, we shall see, brighter than any lingering darkness, the God who is light and love, the Lord who, as the university's motto reminds us, 'is our light and our salvation' (Psalm 27.1).