

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – March 22 2020**

Hello

My name is Bill Young and I am minister in the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches

Worship in our churches is suspended at the moment because of the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic, so as a new venture I am recording some thoughts on the weekly lectionary scripture readings to offer to and on behalf of the Group, via the Internet and social media.

Welcome to a podcast reflection for Sunday 22 March.

### **Psalm 23**

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Even 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, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

This week we are offered Psalm 23 – a classic Old Testament expression of the confidence the writer feels that, whatever is happening to him, God is there and is looking after him. Like a shepherd then or now, the sheep are his responsibility and will not be abandoned.

Perhaps with everything going on in the world just now we need that assurance. We are advised to be on our own, not to mingle, as it were, with the rest of the flock. This is counter-intuitive when we depend so often and so much on other people.

Everyone will have worries, and other emotions will also rise. Disbelief, irritation, despair at where we have come to when panic strips shoppers of their usual courtesy and restraint.

As I prepare this podcast the URC has just distributed a prayer written by Jan Berry:

*God our refuge,  
we seek your protection.  
Protect the vulnerable from illness:  
those who are old and frail,  
weakened by years and struggle;  
those who care for others,  
expending energy and love;  
those for whom inability to work  
means hardship and poverty.*

*Protect us  
from the greed and suspicion  
which snatches at our own security  
stock-piling and panic-buying  
that deprives others of the necessities of life.*

*Protect us from the shortsightedness*

*which sees the germ in our own eyes  
and ignores the plagues  
of hunger, war and violence  
that take so many lives each day.*

*Protect us from the isolation  
that leads to loneliness and despair  
denying the interconnectedness  
that links us with one another.*

*God our refuge  
in our panic and fear  
may we not lose sight of our common humanity  
that makes us one people in you.  
Amen.*

Jesus gave us a pattern of prayer:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.  
Amen*

Staying in the Old Testament, here is a story from the first book of Samuel

### **1 Samuel 16.1-13**

*The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.'*

*But Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me.'*

*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 to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate.'*

*Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, 'Do you come in peace?' Samuel replied, 'Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.' Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.*

*When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'*

*Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, 'The Lord has not chosen this one either.' Jesse then made Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, 'Nor has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has not chosen these.' So he asked Jesse, 'Are these all the sons you have?'*

*'There is still the youngest,' Jesse answered. 'He is tending the sheep.' Samuel said, 'Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.' So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.*

*Then the Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; this is the one.' So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David.*

## **Reflection - Seeing the Light**

We can reflect on that passage, our first encounter with the boy who was going to become king, King David as we also bring in the Gospel story offered to us this week, seeking an overarching theme. Our passage is actually the *whole* of Chapter 9 of John's Gospel.

I think today's theme is how God surprises us, challenging our prejudices and preconceptions and how he turns the logic of our world upside down. In a sense, our theme is "Seeing the Light".

It's the seeing the light in the sense of sudden realisation that occurs at the end of a particularly good mystery story or whodunit play. The clues are there all along, though we are taken by surprise and we're led down the wrong path at various times. We ought to have known, or at least allowed for the *possibility* that the man we saw walking across the stage in a mask, wearing a stripy jumper and carrying a bag labelled "swag" was not in fact the thief, but someone going to a fancy dress party. And just because Lady Alicia is found stooped over her rich husband's body clutching a dripping knife, we shouldn't jump to conclusions!

In the reading from the Old Testament earlier on, Samuel was taken by surprise by the fact that neither Eliab nor Aminadab nor Shammah came up to scratch, despite being big strapping lads. When we read in the next chapter about the slaying of Goliath, these are the three sons out of Jesse's eight who are strong enough to go off to war for Israel. Eliab reappears as the nasty big brother who gives David a ticking off simply for turning up, for abandoning the family sheep and no doubt for being an embarrassment. I have been an embarrassing younger brother in my time.

No, Samuel is told that man's, humankind's criteria for determining what is good and bad, what is strong and weak, what is right and wrong are not the same as God's.

And yet, like the crime novel, or should I say the best crime novels, the clues are all there. God as we encounter him in the Old Testament has not hidden from us his purposes, or his standards. The books of Moses are full of rules, and as Jesus would say, they can be distilled into remarkably few. Love one another. Love your neighbour as yourself. Love God as he merits

If God had been obscure and unclear about the way he wanted people to live, Samuel would be justified in feeling aggrieved that he was corrected again and again when thought that "such and such" a son of Jesse was the one to anoint. If the writer of a crime story waited until the last chapter before producing three new suspects, an international terrorist plot and a missing heir, we would think they were lacking somewhat in the area of plot development, and we wouldn't buy any more of his or her books.

The blindness to what God *actually* wants and does and can do continued into the New Testament. So listen to these words from John's Gospel, in Chapter 9. It's a story you've probably heard before.

[John 9]

1. *As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth.*
- 2 *His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*
- 3 *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*
- 4 *As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no-one can work.*
- 5 *While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

We continue

- 6 *Having said this, Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.*
- 6 *Having said this, Jesus spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes.*
- 7 *"Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam". So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.*
8. *His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?"*
- 9 *Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."*
- 10 *"How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded.*
- 11 *He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."*
- 12 *"Where is this man?" they asked him. "I don't know," he said.*

If we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, then we probably believe that the device of putting mud on the man's eyes was symbolic and not itself the way he was cured. Jesus could cure the Centurion's servant at a distance, he could cure this man with a glance. But the symbolism of washing away what had been before was very powerful.

So, another miracle, with the theme of Jesus the light of the world at the forefront. But **not** just another miracle, because here we see - not just the event recorded, but the public enquiry afterwards.

13. *They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind.*
- 14 *Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath.*

So we start to hear the evidence. The case for the prosecution begins:

- 15 *Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."*

The man wouldn't be sitting there, or standing there in the witness box if there was not enough basic evidence that a miracle had taken place. This was plainly a good thing. But the Pharisees had this mental block. If it was done on the Sabbath, then it had to be a *bad* thing.

- 16 *Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided.*

They look for a way out:

17 Finally they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."

18 The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents.

19 "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

20 "We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind."

21 But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself."

22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue.

23 That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man [Jesus] is a sinner."

25 He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

26 Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

27 He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

It's one of those occasions when someone they thought was stupid and of no consequence was performing a more rational analysis of the whole thing than they did. The facts were there in front of them. Get rid of the prejudice and the pre-conceptions (and this blind man didn't have them to start with) and the solution was there to see. Jesus **had** cured him.

They were asking the wrong questions. They were trying to establish whether something had happened, instead of accepting that it had, and asking why, or how. We need to ask the right questions in order to get the right answers.

It is important to be clear in the questions we ask, or the answers won't be clear either. If people are not on the same wavelength, as we say, then communication cannot take place. I know I've told the story before of someone who was trying to have a religious conversation with my mother in the late 1970's, and when this person asked "Have you been converted", my Mum assumed this lady was talking about natural gas.

The man the Pharisees thought was so far beneath them had seen the light before them.

28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, "**You** are this fellow's disciple! **We** are disciples of Moses!"

29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

30 The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes."

31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.

32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

34 To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

36 "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me, so that I may believe in him."

37 Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

38 Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him.

39. Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

And of course he's not just talking about physical ailments in a man born blind so long ago. This is *spiritual* blindness too.

40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"

41 Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

No blame attaches to those who have not had a chance to discover what God requires, who have not heard the basics. But they had. And they thought they had absorbed them and lived by them.

But they were deluding themselves. No one can afford to be smug. Even if you are accustomed to worshipping in church every Sunday morning, even if you think you know what you know, you have to be open to the new light that God shines on his world; you have to keep checking to see what has been brought out of the shadows.

If we proclaim Jesus as the light of the world, it's no use doing it with our eyes shut.

### **A prayer**

*Lord God, who revealed your chosen King to Samuel, who revealed Jesus to the blind man and to the world, show us what we should choose among the options of this world.*

*May we choose to care for others and not just for ourselves*

*May we choose to shed light even when we might prefer to hide in the shadows*

*May we look for ever new opportunities to share your love rather than be satisfied with the story so far.*

*This is a time when nations are looking to their own needs. Help us to retain a sense of a world-wide human family of which we are caring members.*

*This is a time of enforced inaction and isolation. Help us to be creative in communication.*

*Be with those who are ill, those who are anxious, those who simply do not or can not understand.*

*You are our shepherd. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, may we fear no evil. For you are with us.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen.*

***On the recording I finished by playing a verse of the Victorian hymn tune 'Aberystwyth', as commonly used for the hymn, 'Jesus, lover of my soul'.***

Thank you for reading or listening to this podcast – constructive feedback is welcome, most usefully via my email:

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