

# the Sunday Readings



*Jesus spat on the ground & made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.  
(John 4: 6-7)*

## 4<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT

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## *Jesus reveals the LORD of Life*<sup>1</sup>

### introduction

As Holy Week approaches, the celebration of the death and above all, the resurrection of *the LORD of life* – we hear John's gospel account of Jesus coming face-to-face with a man blind from birth, who has been forced to beg in order to stay alive. Instead of blaming those who are ill or poor; instead of pushing them deeper into their plight; instead of preventing them from taking appropriate actions to escape their situations, Jesus reminds us that GOD is a GOD of love and not a GOD of punishment. By liberating us from any narrow and self-serving interpretation of a blind beggar's situation, Jesus reveals the GOD of Life-giving and Love.<sup>2</sup>

first reading: **Samuel 16 : 1, 6–7, 10–13**<sup>3</sup>

[ David is anointed king ]

*The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."(1) . . . When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD."(6) 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."(7) . . . Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these."(10) Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here."(11) He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."(12) Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.(13).*

Under pressure from the Philistines, the Israelites gave themselves a king, Saul. The prophet Samuel before anointing Saul, had warned the people of the demands that kings make (1 Sm.8). The narrative tells of David's rise from a nobody to be the royal replacement for Saul. The LORD speaks to Samuel, the

1 Cover Image: [Christ healing the man born blind](#) (detail) by *El Greco* (1560)

2 For candidates of an Easter baptism, today is time for *a second scrutiny*. The believing community acts so that the baptismal candidate's already expressed desire to '*see with the eyes of faith*' is supported by the community's prayer. This applies as much to baptismal candidates as it applies to all who seek renewal of commitment to their baptismal life.

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

powerful but increasingly cantankerous man of faith, who seems increasingly unable to manage. Samuel's inaction is rebuked and in passing the listener hears the fact of Saul's rejection (v.1). Now there is a chance for a new shaping of power among the Israelites. To the delight of the marginal ones who have not enjoyed power or possessions under Saul's kingship, the LORD says, "*I have found a king myself!*" This is a further rebuke to Samuel. GOD had let Samuel do it previously. With Saul, the Israelites had got a loser. So GOD does it this time round. Samuel is commanded to "*fill*", "*go*" and "*send*". GOD has found a king and the matter is settled even before Samuel is commanded to go and meet Jesse and his sons.<sup>4</sup>

Seven sons pass in review. Eliab is impressive. Samuel's judgement is swayed by his appearance. And also by the other six. "*Do not look on appearances*" (v.7) is another rebuke earned by Samuel's selection of Saul, for he had picked the earlier king on the basis of his appearance.<sup>5</sup> David, the eighth son, is impressive too! But that is not why he is chosen. "*Don't look at appearances, look at the heart.*" Is he anointed finally because he looks the part and is Samuel once more deceived? Or is David anointed in spite of all of that, because he has a different heart? The "*Spirit of GOD*" does not hesitate. There is a break with the past, on the rejection of Saul (v.1) and the rush of the Spirit powerfully on David (v.13) anticipates what is to come.<sup>6</sup>

**response: Psalm 23 : 1 – 6**

[ the Divine Shepherd ]

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.(1)  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;(2) he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.(3)  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil; for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff – they comfort me.(4)  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.(5)  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life, and I shall dwell  
in the house of the LORD my whole life long.(6)*

The LORD GOD is imaged as shepherd and host at a banquet. In the Israelite covenant tradition, the speaker suggests that GOD plays host, having first guided

4 The narrative warns against looking on appearances because the monied, landed-ones, tend also to be the "*beautiful people.*"

5 1 Sm.9:2

6 The narrative is history-making. It is a narrative that creates a world for the marginal ones. What they sense in David is that real power is not seen in forms visible to human eyes, but in the wind that is not seen, yet cannot be resisted. As the wind blows where it will (Jn.3:8) it is not shaped by the old agent of power – who had served only to monopolise for some and exclude others. The narrative proposes an alternative to the world of monopoly and exclusion, giving the marginal ones someone in whom to hope and trust.

the people through difficult paths. The theme of 'peace' was GOD's great gift to the covenant people.

The psalmist refuses to split things into spiritual and material. GOD satisfied every kind of need, so the poet's affirmation never could mean only religious yearning. The images of cup and table guard against spiritualising – for they concern real food and real drink. In Israelite memory,<sup>7</sup> the mana – the surprising bread of heaven – overcomes hunger, so no one lacks. The poetry recalls situations of threat but the poet knows that the powerful solidarity of GOD more than overrides the threat.

**second reading: Ephesians 5 : 8 – 14**

[ renounce pagan ways ]

*For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light-(8) for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.(9) Try to find out what is pleasing to the LORD.(10) Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.(11) For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly;(12) but everything exposed by the light becomes visible,(13) for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."(14)*

'Enlightenment' was one of the names given in ancient tradition to baptism. Living 'in the light' produces every kind of goodness, justice and truth (vv.8-9). The author affirms that those renewed in Christ are light. But light for what? To exclusively concentrate on belonging to the church as the ultimate goal of GOD's plan of salvation in Christ, leaves out of consideration a large part of the world that is not yet renewed in Christ. Many in the world are neither believing nor hostile. The danger for the Ephesians is that they fail to deal with this 'third world' that is neither light nor darkness. What is distinctive about the Christian community is its relationship to Christ and the special holiness that flowed from that relationship. But the task for the Christian disciple must not become self-absorbed about personal holiness.

**gospel reading: John 9 : 1 – 41**

[ a man born blind receives sight ]

*As he walked along, Jesus saw a man blind from birth.(1) His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"(2) Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that GOD's works might be revealed in him.(3) We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work.(4) As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."(5) When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes,(6) saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.(7) The neighbours and those who had*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ex.16.18

seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?"(8) Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."(9) But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"(10) He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight."(11) They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."(12) They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind.(13) Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes.(14) Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."(15) Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from GOD, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided.(16) So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet."(17) The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight(18) and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"(19) His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind;(20) but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."(21) His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.(22) Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."(23) So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to GOD! We know that this man is a sinner."(24) He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."(25) They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"(26) 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?"(27) Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.(28) We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."(29) The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.(30) We know that GOD does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will.(31) Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind.(32) If this man were not from GOD, he could do nothing."(33) They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?" And they drove him out.(34) Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"(35) He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him."(36) Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."(37) He said, "LORD, I believe." And he worshipped him.(38) Jesus said, "I came into this world for

*judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."(39) Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?"(40) Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."(41)*

The opposite of faith is fatalism. It is the prevailing attitude of most people most of the time. This attitude is expressed in words like, *"nothing can be done about it"* or *"we must be realistic"*. These are words of people who don't believe in the power of GOD's promise. The man's blindness enables GOD to work powerfully.<sup>8</sup> Faith was an attitude that people caught from Jesus through their contact with him. When the general atmosphere of fatalism has been replaced by an atmosphere of faith, the seemingly impossible begins to happen. It makes questions about the cause of fatalism – that is sin – irrelevant.

The display of GOD's power, shows GOD's willingness to save and liberate. Jesus' motive was no desire to prove he was *'Son of GOD'*. That is to misunderstand him. His single motive for healing people was compassion – to liberate people from their sufferings and their fatalistic resignation to suffering. Jesus wanted to awaken the same compassion and faith in people around him. That would enable the power of GOD to become active and effective among them. Jesus says elsewhere in John's gospel, that he is, *"the Truth, the Way and the Life."* All that is the same as saying, *"I am the Light"* (v.5).<sup>9</sup> When Jesus says, *"I am the Light of the world"*, he is saying, that he is the essential part of this whole evolutionary process away from death and darkness, towards light and life.

The threat of death is already casting its shadow over Jesus' life. He cannot delay the healing of the blind man. As death draws closer, Jesus' life and light-giving activity increases (vv.6-7). John emphasises that the blind man is healed only when he washed in the Pool of Siloam. The name of the place where the healing water is found, clearly links with Jesus' work.<sup>10</sup> The dialogue is between the small guy and the big shots.<sup>11</sup>

In the old days, this sad situation was called, *'original sin'*. It might seem to read a lot into the statement that the blind man was born that way but the point

8 The gospel accounts reflect something of the fatalism of the poor, the sinners and the sick, in Jesus' time. The success of his healing activity is a sign of the triumph of faith over fatalism.

9 Science says that the universe originated from light. The stars are concentrations of light and heat energy. Life on Earth proceeds from the light and heat energy of one star – our Sun. The increasing complexity of life and the socialisation of people are a new phase in the same process that began with the concentration of the stars.

10 *Jn.7:37*

11 Some commentators think these references to seeing and blindness, reflect a highly developed late first century liturgical practice of adult baptism. By that time, adult baptism had come to be understood as a spiritual enlightenment, a point of discerning life's values. For people "born blind." Christian baptism goes to the root of life's problems. Ignorance, self-centred and indulgent greed, weigh us down. Memories of ancestral evils, real or imagined, spew generation after generation of bigot, bully, small-time atheist, no-hoper!

is that Christians think that their baptism does something about this dire and obvious condition of human life. They see the odds against them realistically and they see Jesus facing the odds and taking on the evil forces and overcoming them. The same Spirit/spirit of GOD that seized David,<sup>12</sup> makes Jesus the hero of his people. This Spirit/spirit, Christians expect at baptism. It is the spirit that allows the *'little ones'* to attack Goliaths with mere slingshots and big-shot religious leaders with simple words of faith. The follower of Jesus, newly enlightened by GOD and welcomed by baptism into the Christian community, had been threatened and judged and condemned and driven out of the synagogue (v.34). That is the very experience of the first Christian communities.

In the final scene, Jesus emerges as judge. The blind man is drawn into a closer intimacy with Jesus. At first Jesus is, *'the man who made a paste and daubed my eyes'* (v.11), then Jesus is, *'the prophet'* (v.17), and finally the man *'sees'* Jesus for the first time (v.38). It is Jesus who seeks him out and calls him to be a disciple (vv.35-37). The man's response on seeing Jesus says, *"LORD, I believe (you are the Son of man)."* In a reversal that matches the warning in the reading from 1 S.16:7 about judging appearances and the heart; Jesus gives enlightenment to the blind and exposes the darkness of the apparently powerful Jewish religious authorities.

for sharing:<sup>13</sup>

- *Don't look at appearances; look at the heart! The world of monopoly and exclusion tends to grab our attention as the only possible world. Yet there is another world; and David on his better days, respects that other world. Comment on **Samuel 16 : 1, 6 – 7, 10 – 13***
- *Concentration on the so-called 'the enlightened ones' (i.e. the church) as the ultimate goal of GOD's plan of salvation in Christ, leaves out of consideration, a large part of the world that is not yet renewed in Christ. Comment on **Ephesians 5 : 8 – 14***

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12 1 Sm.16ff

13 Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

- *Fatalism is the opposite to faith. The success of Jesus' healings is a sign of the triumph of faith over fatalism. Comment on John 9:1 – 41*

**prayer:**<sup>14</sup>

*GOD our Creator,  
show forth your mighty works in the midst of Your people.  
Enlighten Your Church,  
that we may know Your Son  
as the true light of the world  
and through our worship confess him  
as Christ and LORD,  
who lives and reigns with You  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
holy and mighty GOD, now and always. Amen.*

**review:**<sup>15</sup>

*GOD's work through Jesus is transformative. The texts contain the communal memory of surprising newness offered. As the speaker of the Psalm affirms, the work of GOD pushes the believer towards trustful living. It is GOD's companionship that transforms every situation and comforts in situations of threat (cf. Ps.95:4).*

*The end of despair is access to the temple, where life is ordered anew. It is not the place, but the vitality of the relationship, which transforms. The temple security only confirms the relationship. The psalmist and the disciple of Jesus, know that evil and threat is still present in the world but are not feared. Confidence in the Holy One is the source of a new direction. We too are sent, to complete the work of GOD in Jesus Christ. Another world with new possibilities and presided over by another authority, has been revealed to us.*

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14 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

15 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.