

# SUNDAY READINGS

## READ AT HOME

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Year A

19 March 2023



### Collect

O God, who through your Word  
reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way,  
grant, we pray,  
that with prompt devotion and eager faith  
the Christian people may hasten  
toward the solemn celebrations to come.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

**Amen.**

### Readings and Commentaries

Radical reversal is today's refrain. The youngest and least of Jesse's sons, David, is chosen to become king. Ephesians who'd been living in darkness have become light in the Lord. The blind man of John's gospel begins to see with both eyes and heart, while the authorities become blinder still.

There's another series of reversals in the gospel story. At first the blind man is an outsider. The gift of sight gives him access to society, but his stubborn adherence to the truth leads to violent exclusion. His new isolation is reversed when faith in Jesus gains him entry into the community of believers.

No doubt most set out on their Lenten journey hoping (or at least wishing) to change for the better. They'd like the light of the Lord to shine in their lives. They'd like the works of light – goodness and right living and truth – to be shown for all to see. The story of the blind man is a sobering reminder that faith in Jesus may have a price tag attached.

**A reading from the first book of Samuel**  
**16:1, 6–7, 10–13**

The Lord said to Samuel, 'Fill your horn with oil and go. I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have chosen myself a king among his sons.' When Samuel arrived, he caught sight of Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed one stands there before him,' but the Lord said to Samuel, 'Take no notice of his appearance or his height for I have rejected him; God does not see as man sees; man looks at appearances but the Lord looks at the heart.' Jesse presented his seven sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen these.' He then asked Jesse, 'Are these all the sons you have?' He answered, 'There is still one left, the youngest; he is out looking after the sheep.' Then Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send for him; we will not sit down to eat until he comes.' Jesse had him sent for, a boy of fresh complexion, with fine eyes and pleasant bearing. The Lord said, 'Come, anoint him, for this is the one.' At this, Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him where he stood with his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord seized on David and stayed with him from that day on.

**Responsorial Psalm** **Ps 22**

**R.** The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.

The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.  
Fresh and green are the pastures  
where he gives me repose.  
Near restful waters he leads me,  
to revive my drooping spirit. **R.**

He guides me along the right path;  
he is true to his name.  
If I should walk in the valley of darkness  
no evil would I fear.  
You are there with your crook and your staff;  
with these you give me comfort. **R.**

You have prepared a banquet for me  
in the sight of my foes.  
My head you have anointed with oil;  
my cup is overflowing. **R.**

Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me  
all the days of my life.  
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell  
for ever and ever. **R.**

**A reading from the letter of St Paul**  
**to the Ephesians** **5:8–14**

You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of light, for the effects of the light are seen in complete goodness and right living and truth. Try to discover what the Lord wants of you, having nothing to do with the futile works of darkness but exposing them by contrast. The things which are done in secret are things that people are ashamed even to speak of; but anything exposed by the light will be illuminated and anything illuminated turns into light. That is why it is said:

Wake up from your sleep,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.

**First Reading**

Three different stories about how David came on the scene follow in quick succession. In the first he is anointed by Samuel (today's reading), in the second he is engaged as a gifted musician to ease Saul's melancholy, and in the third he slays Goliath. The story of his anointing by Samuel carries the greatest weight because the prophet is acting on God's orders and confirms the choice of David with a formal ritual.

The story has been slightly and successfully abbreviated for lectionary use. The tension increases as the action unfolds. Seven of Jesse's sons are presented and rejected one by one. All seems lost until it's revealed there is an eighth out minding the sheep. He's the youngest and therefore the least likely candidate. But he's described favourably, identified as the chosen one, and duly anointed. Notably, unlike the judges who had been Israel's occasional and spirited leaders prior to Saul, David receives the spirit of the Lord as a permanent gift.

Like David himself, this story has great appeal. It's full of human interest as well as being a significant episode in the saga of Israel's graced history. Readers should enjoy drawing the assembly into the unfolding action which comes to a happy resolution at the very end.

**Responsorial Psalm**

The choice of Psalm 22/23 was no doubt prompted by the story of the shepherd-boy David being designated shepherd-king of Israel. Beyond that, however, lies the over-arching image of God as Israel's shepherd. The people's familiarity with the responsibilities of earthly shepherds made it easy to think of God in these terms. Just as shepherds ensured their sheep were kept safe and fed, so Israel's God protected and nourished the nation.

Complementing the prime image of shepherding is that of hospitality. Generous provision for guests was (and remains) embedded in middle eastern culture. God may thus be readily thought of as a host who welcomes guests with scented oil and plies them with an abundance of food and drink. The buoyant spirit of the psalm is tinged with a realistic recognition of life's difficulties. Shepherds must lead their flock through "the valley of darkness," while hosts provide for their guests "in the sight of (their) foes".

The principal challenge for readers is to pray this very familiar and much-loved psalm with fresh devotion. They will have served the assembly well if they give the impression the psalm has only just been discovered. They also need to take care with the two-part response and the two six-line stanzas. Thoughtful intonation and pausing will give the assembly the cues it needs to respond with confidence.

## A reading from the holy Gospel according to John

9:1–41

As Jesus went along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. [His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?' 'Neither he nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered, 'he was born blind so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

'As long as the day lasts I must carry out the work of the one who sent me; the night will soon be here when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world.'

Having said this,] he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man and said to him, 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam' (a name that means 'sent'). So the blind man went off and washed himself, and came away with his sight restored.

His neighbours and people who earlier had seen him begging said, 'Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?' Some said, 'Yes, it is the same one.' Others said, 'No, he only looks like him.' The man himself said, 'I am the man.' [So they said to him, 'Then how do your eyes come to be open?' 'The man called Jesus' he answered 'made a paste, daubed my eyes with it and said to me, "Go and wash at Siloam"; so I went, and when I washed I could see.' They asked, 'Where is he?' 'I don't know' he answered.]

They brought the man who had been blind to the Pharisees. It had been a sabbath day when Jesus made the paste and opened the man's eyes, so when the Pharisees asked him how he had come to see, he said, 'He put a paste on my eyes, and I washed, and I can see.' Then some of the Pharisees said, 'This man cannot be from God: he does not keep the sabbath.' Others said, 'How could a sinner produce signs like this?'

And there was disagreement among them. So they spoke to the blind man again, 'What have you to say about him yourself, now that he has opened your eyes?' 'He is a prophet' replied the man.

[However, the Jews would not believe that the man had been blind and had gained his sight, without first sending for his parents and asking them, 'Is this man really your son who you say was born blind? If so, how is it that he is now able to see?' His parents answered, 'We know he is our son and we know he was born blind, but we don't know how it is that he can see now, or who opened his eyes. He is old enough: let him speak for himself.' His parents spoke like this out of fear of the Jews, who had already agreed to expel from the synagogue anyone who should acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. This was why his parents said, 'He is old enough; ask him.'

So the Jews again sent for the man and said to him, 'Give glory to God! For our part, we know that this man is a sinner.' The man answered, 'I don't know if he is a sinner; I only know that I was blind and now I can see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He replied, 'I have told you once and you wouldn't listen. Why do you want to hear it all again? Do you want to become his disciples too?' At this they hurled abuse at him: 'You can be his disciple,' they said 'we are disciples of Moses: we know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this man, we don't know where he comes from.' The man replied, 'Now here is an astonishing thing! He has opened my eyes, and you don't know where he comes from! We know that God doesn't listen to sinners, but God does listen to men who are devout and do his will. Ever since the world began it is unheard of for anyone to open the eyes of a man who was born blind; if this man were not from God, he couldn't do a thing.'] 'Are you trying to teach us,' they replied 'and you a sinner through and through, since you were born!' And they drove him away.

Jesus heard they had driven him away, and when he found him he said to him, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 'Sir,' the man replied 'tell me who he is so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said, 'You are looking at him; he is speaking to you.' The man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and worshipped him.

[Jesus said: 'It is for judgement that I have come into this world, so that those without sight may see and those with sight turn blind.' Hearing this, some Pharisees who were present said to him, 'We are not blind, surely?'

Jesus replied: 'Blind? If you were, you would not be guilty, but since you say, "We see", your guilt remains.']

[Short Form: omit text in brackets.]

## Second Reading

For the vast majority of the Australian population, living as they do in an urban environment, the elemental impact of light and darkness is dulled, yet the metaphor still has power to capture our imaginations. Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians provides an appealing exploration of the idea. The strong contrast Paul draws between light and darkness may bring John's gospel and the writings of the Jewish sect, the Essenes, to mind.

At one level Paul sets the "futile works of darkness" over against the works of light, namely "complete goodness and right living and truth". But he begins with a more radical statement. He tells his readers they "were darkness once" and are now "light in the Lord". Their very identity was darkness and now it is light. They have been transformed in their very being.

The passage finishes with what appears to be a fragment from a Christian hymn. It adds another dimension to the reflection, that of being brought from the sleep of death to the light of life. The prevailing spirit of the reading is one of encouragement. Paul is offering the Ephesians wise and positive advice. Readers have the pleasure of proclaiming it to the worshipping community.

## Gospel

We come to the second of the three great Johannine narratives that have historically featured on these Sundays of Lent – the woman at the well, the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Each discloses something fundamental about Jesus' identity. In turn he is the Messiah, the light of the world, and the resurrection and the life.

Once again there are choices to be made. Is it better to read the full story or the abridged version? Whichever is selected, is it more effective to proclaim it via a single voice or with an ensemble of voices? The pros and cons are much the same as for last Sunday's gospel and do not need repeating here. While the shorter version reads quite coherently, it omits Jesus' claim to be the light of the world and his dramatic judgement on the authorities at the end.

Like the Samaritan woman, the man born blind gains insight and grows in faith as the drama unfolds. In the longer option, "the man called Jesus" becomes "a prophet," then someone who must be "from God," then "the Son of Man," and finally "Lord". Unlike the woman at the well, who is led to faith through an intimate encounter with Jesus alone, the blind man's belief is forged in the crucible of intense public hostility.

Whatever choices are made, this splendidly constructed story deserves to be proclaimed with flair, faith and skill.

## Concluding Prayer

### Prayer over the People (Fourth Sunday of Lent)

Look upon those who call to you, O Lord,  
and sustain the weak;  
give life by your unfailing light  
to those who walk in the shadow of death,  
and bring those rescued by your mercy from every evil  
to reach the highest good.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

And may the blessing of almighty God,  
the Father, and the Son, + and the Holy Spirit,  
come down on us and remain with us for ever.  
**Amen.**

(Adapted from the Prayer over the People for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Roman Missal p. 272.)