

## The Fourth Sunday in Lent; Year A (RCL)

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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*Gracious God,  
Give us eyes to see your face and ears to hear your word,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Our readings this morning have to do with sight, vision, ocularity; as with all things biblical, the message is nuanced. In our first reading, Samuel is called by the Lord to identify a new king after Saul flames out. He goes to the home of Jesse to scrutinize the boys in the family. He's instructed to look not on outward appearances but to see as the Lord sees, to look on the heart. Seven lads troop by, all are rejected. David, out with the sheep, is summoned. He happens to be easy on the eye but that's not why he's chosen. In time we'll learn that his heart, though not entirely pure, is brave, faithful, and capable of searching self-reflection. He's anointed and the spirit of the Lord comes upon him that day.

In the gospel, Jesus the Christ (i.e. the Anointed One) encounters a blind person. The man becomes the subject of theological speculation among Jesus' traveling companions, speculation that reveals the spiritual blindness of the disciples. Jesus, disinterested in this heartless inquiry, heals the man with dirt and spit. This baffles the neighbors and disturbs the local bigwigs. The Pharisees pass judgment because the healing occurs on the Sabbath and because they don't respect Jesus' credentials – how can a sinner heal?

They next turn to the recently blind one and ask for his opinion. He believes Jesus to be a prophet. This declaration sends the self-important leaders spinning; they call in the man's parents. The parents, intimidated, offer simple testimony and refer the leaders back to their son. The man, exasperated at this point, mocks the Pharisees for their blindness of heart. He's driven out. Jesus looks for him and reveals the true identity of his healer. The task of the Messiah, he says, is to heal those who do not see to see and to make blind those overly confident in their vision.

The deepest desire of the human heart, the mystics tell us, is to see God face-to-face. That desire is both terrifying and irresistible. Moses, on Sinai, cannot look upon the face of God or he'll die. And yet, as the Song of Solomon depicts, we still long for that ultimate vision in the same way the groom aches to see his bride.

God obliges us in the Incarnation. Jesus is the human face of God; we're taught that we see the Father as we gaze upon the Son. And yet, even that self-offering fails to fully satisfy. A few in his day saw Jesus face-to-face but those few were mostly blind – they neglected to notice his glory. The rest of us are offered stories and promises; we're eternally grateful for both and we're still left with longing hearts. It's somewhat akin to falling in love through years and years of correspondence; letter writing is a good and blessed thing but we still yearn for the day of direct encounter.

Perhaps that's why Jesus was so insistent on the Great Commandment in both parts – love God with your entire being and love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps the second part of the law delivers in this regard. Perhaps we're given glimpses of the face of God, not only in the person of Jesus, but in the face of our neighbor. Remember that this is one of the promises we make at baptism; with God's help, we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Notice that the promise is to not just serve but to *seek* and serve – searching for the face of Christ in the face of those near us in the same way Jesus sought out the healed man at the end of

today's gospel. Now that's a grand promise we make, a delightful image, but it's generally harder to do than vow. Recall the story of the bishop from Latin America who once said, "I look for Christ in every person who comes into my office; sometimes he comes in deep disguise." That's wonderful both in its aspiration and its honesty.

Southern Californians know something about the two sides of that. When it comes to our nearest neighbors, we tend to be simultaneously friendly and guarded. The truth is, we can be more guarded than friendly. We're known to be fiercely independent and, to a disturbing degree, socially disconnected, especially when measured against peers from other regions. This, by the way, is not merely my subjective opinion – social science backs me up. In one study (Putnam), San Diego was rated the second loneliest city in America – Los Angeles was number one. That's not a race we want to win. Now this data point may not accord perfectly with the facts of your life but we are still well-served to resist universalizing our own experience (that, by the way, is good advice almost all the time) and listen deeply.

The truth of this came home to me while at the gym last week. I arrived there mid-morning to find the place relatively empty. Perfect. I got on a treadmill to walk a mile to warm-up. Twenty treadmills lined up and I'm the only person using one - until a woman gets on the machine right next to me. Did you catch that? Twenty empty treadmills and she climbs aboard the one immediately to my right. That's not how we do it around here. She smiled and greeted me – her accent suggested that she's part of the Russian émigré community resident in East County. She was of my mother's generation and could not have been more pleasant. I, on the other hand, could have been a bit more comfortable. I stayed on for the whole mile but it was a spiritual discipline to do so. Seek and serve Christ in all persons? She could have been the mother of Christ for all I know – the Theotokos, the God-bearer – but I was perfectly blind to her deeper identity, either her divinity or her humanity.

I'm sharing this with you now simply to mark that I'm a child of the culture. I suspect I'm not alone. I'm also now asserting that this isolating culture of ours bears small resemblance to the kingdom of God that Jesus so frequently and fervently described. In that realm, one's neighbor is not an interloper, or a nuisance, or a problem to be avoided, but is, rather, a sacrament - the outward and visible sign of the One who creates, redeems, and inspires all life. The loyal citizens of that godly society engage, make connections, come up alongside one another, comfort, befriend, visit, offer hospitality. They do this first because they are commanded to do so but also because they cling to the promise; they hope to catch a glimpse of their Lord, their gracious lover of souls, in the face of their beloved neighbor. Citizens of that kingdom peer through their particular culture to spy the animating presence of God immediately beneath and behind the humdrum scenes of everyday life.

We dearly wish to be numbered among them, being healed of our blindness by the very One in whose name these words have been offered. Amen.