

No longer in the dark!

John 9:1-41 & Psalm 23

Sunday 3 April 2011
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Jesus opens our eyes so that we can see that our deepest needs are satisfied only in God.

Intro: Multiple layers to readings and theme to light and dark
This sermon inspired by notes read some time ago, linking these 2 passages

You know the saying – especially if you feel that you are the last to find out about something at work or if you feel “the authorities” are deliberately not telling the truth – the saying about being treated like a mushroom: kept in the dark and fed nothing but ... manure!

Even if you ARE paranoid, it doesn't mean that there isn't a conspiracy to keep you in the dark! There are some very powerful forces at work in the world, and often it is in their best interests to treat us like mushrooms.

Sometimes we become aware of what they are doing, but still struggle to get our eyes open and see the truth. The powerful tobacco industry deliberately concealed evidence about the harm their products cause. Many of us are convinced that political leaders deliberately kept us in the dark over some issues ... for instance, issues that led to the invasion of Iraq, and political issues in this country stretching over decades; right now there's fuss about whether or not President Zuma supported recent arms sales from SA to Libya.

Powerful vested interests find ways to keep us in the dark. They are not always commercial interests. And some of the things we can be kept in the dark about, include important truths about what life is all about and where we find the source of true fulfilment and purpose; where we can find that which will begin to satisfy our deepest hungers and hopes. There are entire economies built on keeping us hungry and un-satisfied and ready to spend spend in an effort to do something about it.

Our gospel reading gave us a fascinating story of the rage that is evoked when the lights go on for someone, when their eyes are opened and they begin to see what is really going on. Such enlightenment, such an alternative view of who's in charge and where the truth comes, is often fought against.

Today's Psalm also provides us with some very good material to reflect on all this. "The Lord is my shepherd." The twenty third psalm is amongst the best known passages in the Bible. And like many well-known passages, its familiarity can rob it of any surprise value and it can slide in and out of our ears almost unheard.

Perhaps the huge popularity of this psalm is due to the way it beautifully and succinctly expresses our deepest yearnings. Who would not love the thought of our spirits being revived as we lie restfully on lush grass surrounded by ferns beside a crystal clear stream? After a week full of un-paid overtime and oppressive deadlines, such an image can inspire many people.

In a world of uncertainty, with too many options and more information than we can process, who doesn't long for a trustworthy guide who can show us the sure paths and whose presence takes away fear even in the dark and threatening places?

And don't our stomachs start rumbling at the thought of a gracious host welcoming us to a banquet table, laden with carefully prepared dishes and wine waiters who never let your glass run empty?

And a hectic pace of life can leave us feeling that we're running harder and harder, always pursued by demands and stresses and pressures? Don't we crave the day when all that pursues us is "kindness and faithful love" - to which we would gladly surrender and take our rest, as a guest of the one who lovingly revives our souls?

Even our wishes that are NOT admirable, get a mention: the desire to see our enemies - those who laughed us off, insulted or opposed us - to see the looks on their faces as they see us vindicated and rewarded for our faithfulness and endurance.

This psalm is one person's prayer of gratitude to the one in whom they found the doorway to life. It doesn't offer simplistic promises like "Go to church and all this will be yours!" but its popularity tells us that many people have, like the writer, found that it is as they journeyed into friendship with God, as they learned to allow God to shepherd them, that they found the source of real life, of life in all its fullness, of food for our deepest hungers and hopes.

But if you turn on your TV for a few hours and watch the ads, you will see a concerted campaign to persuade you to look elsewhere. You will see commercial after commercial using images like those in the psalm, and variations on them, to lure us into associating various consumer products with expectations of happiness and fulfilment, with finding rest and safety and satisfaction. Advertisers are experts at knowing how to hook into human needs, wants and fears.

Fly with us and relax in quiet luxury as we refresh your spirit. Eat here, fresh mouth watering food, all you can eat and a bottomless coffee.

Drive this car and see how jealous your snooty neighbours will be.

They lie, of course, and we know it. At best these goods and services satisfy superficial needs. The day after our purchase we don't feel any more whole or fulfilled as human beings. One more promise has come to nothing. An itch has been scratched, someone else has profited in the process, but satisfaction is as elusive as ever...

... And we remain in the dark, groping for answers, because they need us to believe that satisfaction is still another purchase away. They cannot afford to have us all deciding that the pathway to satisfying our deepest hungers and hopes might lie in putting an end to the feast of consumption and investing in the treasures of the spirit which money can't buy.

That's why Jesus was such a dangerous figure. He openly proclaimed that his mission was to open the eyes of the blind and to set free those who were held captive in the darkness. No wonder the authorities continually tried to get rid of him. In the gospel story we saw what they will do when people start to have their eyes opened so that they can see the truth. Immediately there was a vicious smear campaign. They tried to discredit the man whose eyes had been opened. He was a liar and a fake they said, he was a sinner and he knew nothing. They tried to threaten his parents in order to get them to pressure him to keep silent.

And of course they tried to discredit Jesus as well. He was not from God, he was a lawbreaker, a sinner, (because he healed on the Sabbath). But when people have really seen the light for themselves, it is almost impossible to get them to shut up and go back to sitting in the darkness. Life in the light is too good and more than makes up for the hostility it provokes.

In keeping with the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, the church seeks to continue to do what Jesus was doing, to open the eyes of those who are searching and lead them out of darkness into the light of God's truth and love and grace.

In this season of Lent in particular, we place ourselves prayerfully before God that our eyes might be opened to the truth, that the demonic influence of darkness might be driven out of our hearts and minds. We pray for the light of truth to shine into our hearts, into our communities, into our world, for it to do the work of conversion in and through us, that the world might be set free from the powers and principalities that flourish and profit from our blindness. They are prayers that are full of yearning for the day when the Lord will shepherd us all safely out of the valley of the shadow of death and into the promised land of lush pastures and still waters and sure paths and a rich banquet spread before us.

When we gather around the Lord's Table in a short while, it certainly won't look like a banquet spread before us to satisfy our every desire. And it isn't. But it is a fore-taste, a doorway inviting us into the banqueting room. We can hang around the doorway and then walk away – go shopping for the goods and services that literally promise “the world” OR we can go through the doorway and continue to have our eyes opened to the light of God.

It is no quick fix. The man in the story didn't immediately find his life becoming the clichéd bed of roses. In fact all hell broke loose for him for a while there. But it is only in God, with our eyes opened, that we will discover what it is we were really hungering for. Those images in the psalm are no more than windows, no more than glimpses of what fulfilment might look like. It is only on the journey into God, the journey of truth, the journey of prayer, that we will ever know what the psalm writer meant about how our deepest yearnings find their answer in God and how, with the Lord as our shepherd, we need nothing more.