



## Opening Prayer for Lent

Almighty God,  
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,  
and from whom no secrets are hidden;  
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,  
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you,  
and worthily magnify your holy name;  
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you have needed help to see a situation clearly and make good decisions. What form did this help take?

## Psalm of the Week – Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, **I shall not want.**  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
**he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.**  
**He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.**  
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.**  
You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;

**you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.**  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all my life,  
**and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord all my life long.**  
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**  
**Amen**

## Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves, and take up their crosses.  
God calls us into that same movement  
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.  
In this quiet space for reflection,  
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation  
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.  
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,  
share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.  
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

## Reading John 9:1 – 41

### Sermon

There is a scene in *Father Ted* in which its two main characters find themselves sent out to make a protest over an erotic movie licensed to be shown on Craggy Island. While they wait hours for the cinema to actually open, they hold signs saying, 'down with that sort of thing' and 'careful now!', slogans I have also seen used in real-life protests on more than one occasion. Now, the point is that Ted and Dougal's attempt to make a stand was more than a little feeble, but their latter slogan does nonetheless have its uses, because sometimes we do indeed need to be reminded to take real care. The subject of healing is one which needs to be handled carefully, not least because much harm can be caused – even with only the very best of intentions. An acquaintance of mine described a recent hurtful experience of being cornered in the street by a stranger who insisted on praying for them to be healed of being partially sighted. I do not doubt that this person genuinely thought they were following the teaching of Jesus, maybe drawing on the example in today's story, but the result was that they caused significant offence. It is a good example of how we need to be careful when we address subjects such as healing and disability.

So, why might this chapter of John's Gospel need careful handling? Jesus had been up to Jerusalem for the Festival of Tabernacles and found himself in conflict with the Pharisees, not least as he rescued the woman caught in adultery from their grasp as they sought to use her to entrap him (John 8:2 – 11). After leaving the Temple with his disciples, they spotted a man sitting and begging, whom we are told had been blind from birth. The Ten Commandments preach against the worship of idols, warning that children would be punished for the iniquities of their parents to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 20:5), compared to the thousands of generations blessed by staying faithful to God's commandments (Exodus 20:6). This may well have

been what was in the minds of the disciples, when they asked Jesus whether it was the man himself or his parents who were responsible for his being born without sight (John 9:2). He tells them that neither of these scenarios was the case, but in order that God's works might be revealed, it was necessary for him to perform them (9:3).

The crux of these first two scenes in the seven-act drama of John 9 is Jesus' teaching about his being the light of the world (9:5), picking up on his earlier declaration from 8:12 to that same effect during the Feast of Tabernacles. His healing of an unnamed man involved the use of ordinary and base stuff, spit and mud, and the washing in the Pool of Siloam that completed the job connects it to the festival and its water rituals (9:6 – 7). Our nearest equivalent would be a harvest festival, and so this story illustrates how the works of God performed in the light of day (9:4) reveal the abundance of new life which Jesus came to bring (10:10). However, there is a crucial detail making this incident different to the healing of Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46 – 52), for example; Jesus did not actually ask whether this man who had been blind from birth wanted to be healed...

Now, given this background, it is not difficult to see why this reading needs careful handling. In addition to possibly being the justification for some Christians attempting to heal others without either request or permission, it has been used to suggest that if somebody has not found the desired result following prayers for healing then they must lack faith, or be harbouring some unconfessed sin preventing God's healing work. Moreover, whilst Jesus breaks a link between sin and suffering that is sometimes characterised as 'natural justice', it does not appear to have stopped some readers focusing on the question asked by the disciples while ignoring the answer! Worse, the notion that someone without sight may be content exactly as they are, with disability being to do with society's inability or unwillingness to make things accessible, just would not enter into some people's heads as they read this challenging account. There is a growing body of work

exploring the theology of disability, and much of what I have tried to outline here has been discussed in great depth. For today, however, we are invited to focus on Jesus as the light of the world.

The narrative that unfolds in John 9 is actually quite farcical, as both the man's quizzical neighbours and the Pharisees struggle to make sense of how it is that somebody blind from birth could now see and no longer needed to beg for survival. The latter scenes of this drama find him causing confusion, and being forced to account for Jesus's whereabouts (9:9 – 12) and action on the Sabbath (9:13 – 17), while his parents were interrogated (9:18 – 23) and he faced demands to condemn Jesus as a sinner (9:24 – 34). Having been cast out when he dared to point out the contradictions in the Pharisees' arguments and put them right, Jesus sought him out (9:35), in a foreshadowing of teaching about being the Good Shepherd in 10:1 – 21. In the only such incident in John's Gospel, Jesus reveals himself as the Son of Man to this unnamed bloke, who in turn worshipped him (9:36 – 38). There is a great irony in a person who had been blind coming to see God in Jesus Christ more clearly than the religious experts, who did not have the vision to look beyond the arguments about the Sabbath preoccupying them but were convinced they saw clearly (9:39 – 41). The unnamed man was the one to embrace God's light and sight.

So, we need to be careful in how we grapple with this passage, with all of the pitfalls we have noted. Yet, there is something quite special about the ways somebody who had been marginalised by the social structures of his day, disabled and pushed into poverty by an unjust culture and system, was able not just to see Jesus clearly but make his case in front of powerful people who would readily condemn him. Having caught a glimpse of the light of God and having had his eyes opened so that he may see clearly, this man who had been blind all of his life was filled with courage and faithful to the truth found when Jesus unexpectedly walked into his life. For us today, there is much to learn from this account, not least in terms of the importance which

Jesus regarded a person who was not cared about by most folk until he had become either a curiosity or stumbling block. Who might the equivalents be today, and how might we show we can see the value of all people in God's eyes? That is the challenge of this text. Amen

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

*Lectio Divina* is a method of engaging with the Scriptures that helps us to be open to what the Holy Spirit specifically wants to say to us. You're invited to use this method of divine reading with today's text.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

God of costly and self-giving love,  
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ  
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,  
we bring our prayers for others to you.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who feel they're stumbling in the darkness,  
and for whom the light of God seems very faint right now.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in situations of war and conflict,  
and all who routinely face injustices, hatred and violence.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those living in places hit by extreme weather,  
and all of those people bearing the brunt of climate change.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those struggling with loneliness and isolation,  
and those who find themselves far away from safety today.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those who're key workers and keep things going,  
especially those in roles which are too often overlooked.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those we know who are suffering right now,  
as we wait for the light of warmer and brighter Spring days.  
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,  
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Final Prayer – Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Lent**

O God, rich in mercy,  
you so loved the world that, when we were dead in our sins,  
you sent your only Son for our deliverance.  
Lifted up from the earth, he is light and life;  
exalted upon the cross, he is truth and salvation.  
Raise us up with Christ that we may walk as children of light.  
We ask this through Christ, who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
holy and mighty God, forever and ever. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**