

## Garry's Pastoral Letter Lent 4A 2020

Dear beloved in Christ

I write on the first Sunday in living memory when we haven't been able to physically gather as a church community around word and sacrament. As many of you will already have discerned, I am an extreme introvert who draws much of my energy from being alone with my thoughts. But even I am starting to feel bereft. I miss, very much, your faces and your animated conversation. I miss the sound of the organ and of singing. I miss the buzz of the time when we pass the peace. I miss the resonance of the word read and preached on your faces as they unfold their truths in real, fleshly, community. And I miss the communality of our communion in the bread and the wine.

These next months will be very difficult to navigate. None of us have really been here before so, to a large degree, we will be making it up as we go along. My intention, at the stage at least, is to write to you each week with some prayers and reflections that you can attend to at home. These are not supposed to replace the prayer of the church – found principally in *A Prayer Book for Australia* – but to compliment it. Indeed, I would strongly encourage each of you to buy or borrow a copy of the prayer book if you do not have it.<sup>1</sup> Each Sunday, you might pray your way through one of the services of word and holy communion. On week-days you might pray your way through morning and evening prayer.<sup>2</sup> I will each week provide you with bible readings to accompany such prayer in this pastoral letter.

Keeping up your prayer life is very important because, in the absence of gathered bible-studies, small-groups, and Sunday services, faith can sometimes atrophy. *Faith is like a muscle. It needs exercise in order to stay strong and agile.*

Our parish does not have the resources – either personal or technical – to stream services from our empty church onto your computer screens. But the good news is that there are plenty of other Anglican churches that can and do. Most of them are providing details about how to tune in on Sunday mornings via Facebook. So, if you are on Facebook, log in and then 'like' these church sites in order to keep up to date with the offerings:

<https://www.facebook.com/StPaulsCathedralMelbourne/>

<https://www.facebook.com/stephenandmary.mtwaverley/>

<https://www.facebook.com/christchurchcathedralnewcastle/>

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<sup>1</sup> The prayer book can be purchased for \$34.95 from <https://www.garrattpublishing.com.au/product/9781876677428/>. Or pop into the church when it is open during the week and borrow a copy.

<sup>2</sup> The Church of England version of daily prayer is available online at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.facebook.com/anglicanaltlav/>

Please know that I am seeking to work from the church building as much as possible, so that the doors are open at least between 10am and 1pm, Monday to Thursday. Please do come in to talk, to light a candle or to pray. You may also request the reserved sacrament. If you feel that you might make yourself available to open the church on Friday, Saturday or Sunday, please be in touch and we'll work something out.

Please, if you are a key-holder and you come to the church for any reason whatsoever, remember to run a sink of hot soapy water and wipe down all the surfaces you touched before you leave. Can I also suggest that you keep a handkerchief or some gloves with you to close the doors after you have cleaned them. This virus can survive on surfaces for up to 72 hours, so we need to keep up our vigilance.

The virus is spreading at an exponential rate. Can I plead with you all to stay home as much as possible, and to remain at least 1.5 metres away from anyone you meet when you are out getting supplies. Wash your hand regularly and use gloves if you are out. One of the better articles I've read this week about how the authorities are dealing (and not dealing) with the virus can be found here: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-21/coronavirus-the-case-for-endgame-c-stop-almost-everything/12077096>. Please stay informed and get your information from reputable sources such as the ABC and government departments. A lot of the stuff circulating on social media and talk-back radio is disgracefully misinformed.

Looking toward Easter, Lil is seeking to place some art/symbols in front of our church building as a witness to our community. If you would like to help her with your time and your muscles, please be in touch on 0418 370 312 or [lil@deverell.net](mailto:lil@deverell.net).

Finally, please stay in touch with each other via phone. We are seeking to set up a matrix of pastoral care so that no-one falls through the cracks. But it is taking a while to get everything in place, so I beg your patience with that. Of course, the most natural forms of care are the best. Phone a friend. And please, if you are struggling to get supplies or need help with anything at all, call me on 0431 866 214 or send me a note via email: [vicar@stagnesblackrock.org.au](mailto:vicar@stagnesblackrock.org.au). I will place this pastoral letter and the attached resources on my website as well.

<http://www.christologia.net>

God bless and keep you all,

Garry Deverell

**Vicar**

## Lectionary Readings for this week

March 2020

HC	MP	EP	
<b>22</b>	<b>FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT</b>		<b>V</b>
<b>Proper collect</b>	<b>Invitation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Lent]</b>		
<i>Main Readings</i>	<i>Supplementary Readings</i>		
1 Samuel 16.1-13	§ Ps 31.1-9	Exodus 5.1-9, 5.19 - 6.1	
Ps 23	§ 2 Corinthians 11.12-21	Ps 69.20-28	
Ephesians 5.8-14		Matthew 27.1-31	
John 9.1-41			
<b>23</b>	<b>Monday V</b>		
Isaiah 65.17-21	Pss 54; 55.1-12 or Ps 25	Ps 55.13-15 (16-17) 18-28	
Ps 30.8-12	Jeremiah 36.1-19	or Ps 15	
John 4.43-54	Luke 18.1-14	Exodus 1	
		Hebrews 12.1-11	
<b>24</b>	<b>Tuesday V</b>	<i>At Evening Prayer: The Annuciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary</i>	<b>W</b>
<i>Paul Couturier, ecumenist (d. 1953)</i>		<i>Collect of a Saint</i>	<b>W</b>
<i>Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, martyr (d. 1980)</i>		<i>Collect of a Martyr</i>	<b>R</b>
Ezekiel 47.1-9 (10-11) 12	Pss 56; 57 or Pss 3; 6	Proverbs 8.1-21	
Ps 46.1-7	Jeremiah 36.20-32	Pss 123; 131	
John 5.1-16	Luke 18.15-30	Matthew 1.18-23	
	<i>At Evening Prayer of the day:</i>	Pss 60; 61 or Pss 32; 130	
		Exodus 2	
		Hebrews 12.12-24	
<b>25</b>	<b>Wednesday THE ANNUNCIATION TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY</b>		<b>W</b>
<b>Proper collect</b>	<b>Invitation, Preface, Post-Communion, Blessing [Mary]</b>		
Isaiah 7.10-14	Ps 85	Ps 89.1-4, 19-38	
Ps 40.6-13	1 Samuel 2.1-10	Genesis 3.8-15	
Hebrews 10.4-10	Hebrews 2.5-18	Romans 5.12-21	
Luke 1.26-38			
<i>Of the day: V</i>			
Isaiah 49.8-15	Pss 62; 63 or Ps 90	Pss 64; 67 or Ps 38	
Ps 145.8-13	Jeremiah 37	Exodus 3	
John 5.17-30	Luke 18.31-43	Hebrews 12.25-29	
<b>26</b>	<b>Thursday V</b>		
Exodus 32.7-14	Pss 65; 70 or Ps 39	Ps 66 or Ps 102	
Ps 106.20-24	Jeremiah 38.1-13	Exodus 4.1-23 (24-26)	
John 5.31-47	Luke 19.1-10	Hebrews 13.1-6	
<b>27</b>	<b>Friday V</b>		
Wisdom 2.1, 12-22	Pss 68.1-20 or Ps 69	Ps 68.(21-23) 24-35 or Ps 22	
Ps 34.15-22	Jeremiah 38.14-28	Exodus 4.27 - 6.1	
John 7.1-2, 10, 25-30	Luke 19.11-27	Hebrews 13.7-17	
<b>28</b>	<b>Saturday V</b>		
Jeremiah 11.18-20	Ps 71 or Ps 88	Ps 119.65-88 or Ps 31	
Ps 7.7-12	Jeremiah 39	Exodus 6.2-13; 6.28 - 7.7	
John 7.40-52	Luke 19.28-48	Hebrews 13.18-25	

*Prayer of the day (for Sunday, March 22)*

Gracious God, in order that we children of earth might discern good from evil you sent your son to be the light of the world: as the light of Christ shines upon us may we learn what pleases you, and live in truth and goodness; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

*Prayer of the week (for use at daily prayer)*

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*A prayer for all those affected by coronavirus from the Church of England*

Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy.  
Sustain and support the anxious, be with those who care for the sick,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may find comfort knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

*Readings for Sunday, March 29<sup>th</sup>, Lent 5:*

Ezekiel 37.1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6-11; John 11.1-45

*Prayer of the day (for Lent 5, Sunday, March 29<sup>th</sup>)*

Life-giving God, your son came into the world to free us all from sin and death: breathe upon us with the power of your Spirit, that we may be raised to new life in Christ, and serve you in holiness and righteousness all our days; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

## Homily - The Hidden Light

1 Samuel 16. 1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5. 8-14; John 9. 1-41

I suppose a number of you have seen a shadow-play. The shadow-play takes place in the darkness. There's this big screen with a fire lit behind it, and the audience watches as the puppeteers tell their story by casting silhouetted shadows on the screen. Because the characters are all in shadow, you can't see their faces or the features of their dress, and there are no colours apart from black or white. Because of this, anyone who is watching must use their imaginations to fill in the gaps, to give form and emotional detail to the character's faces as they make their journey's through the highs and lows of the tale as it unfolds. Now, the story we read from John's gospel just now works a bit like a shadow-play. The writer delivers his story not with colourful figures rich in detail, but with characters barely drawn, silhouettes in light and dark. And the reader, or the hearer in this case, is invited to read between the lines, to exercise discernment about the degree to which the story's truth is visible for all to see, or secretly hidden in the shadows.

At first glance, what we have here is a simple miracle story about a Jewish man, born blind, whose sight is wondrously restored by Jesus on the Sabbath day and therefore cast out of the synagogue for his trouble. Eventually he becomes a Christian, a believer in Jesus. But look again. Is that *all* there is to this story?

Most commentators will tell you that the story is 'really' about faith, that faith is here represented as a seeing, with lack of faith as its opposite, represented here as a kind of spiritual blindness. Note that when Jesus finds the young man after he has been cast from the synagogue, he asks him a question: "Do you believe in the Son of Humanity?" The fellow replies, "And who is he, sir, tell me so that I may believe in him." Jesus replies, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." At that point, the young man cries out: "Lord, I believe" and worships him. This passage makes quite a solid link between seeing and believing. When the man 'sees' who Jesus is, suddenly he has faith in Jesus, the kind of faith which falls to its knees in worship. Seeing is firmly established as a metaphor for faith. And the case is apparently strengthened further in the commentary that follows, where Jesus says: "I came into the world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do not see may become blind". In other words, Jesus comes to give faith to those without it, and to expose the lack of faith in those who pretend to have it. Faith is seeing, and lack of faith is blindness.

But hang on a minute. I'm not so sure that this traditionally correct approach is *nuanced* enough. Consider, if you will, the following questions. First, if faith is seeing, then why doesn't John have the young man make his declaration of faith when first he is healed by Jesus? Why the long lag between seeing and believing? Second, and intimately related to this first question: if faith is seeing, then why does the young man not 'see' into the true identity of Jesus until right at the end of the story? When first asked who Jesus is by the Jews, the young man replies 'He is a prophet,' which is true, but only partly true. In the gospel of John, Jesus is pre-eminently not only a prophet but the Christ, the Son of Humanity, the pre-existent Word of God made flesh. And later, when he is questioned more thoroughly, the young man declares that Jesus must have come from God, which is true, but again not true enough. In John's gospel, Jesus not only comes from God, but is God: he has been as one with the Father from the beginning. And there is a further point which the traditional reading cannot account for. When the young man finally makes his confession of faith, it is not a 'seeing' which makes the difference, but a hearing. Jesus says to the man, "You have seen the Son of Humanity, I, the one speaking to you am he". And it is then, and only then, that the man fall to his knees in worship. Did you catch that? The man had seen Jesus before, but it did not give him faith. Faith finally comes to him only in the wake of this self-revelatory speech of Jesus: "I am he".

Now, why am I telling you all this? What does it matter if faith is a matter of seeing or a matter of hearing? What does it matter how faith comes, as long as it is faith? Well, it matters quite a lot actually. Because if faith comes by seeing, then it is not really faith. It is knowing. And knowing is the means by which we try to reduce God to our size and make of God some kind of idol that we can get our heads around. But a God we can get our heads around is not the Christian God, the God who made the heavens and the earth, the God of Jesus Christ. It is a God of our own making, a version of our dreams or fears, projected into the heavens and given the name 'God', a God we can control and domesticate. A tame God who never asks us to change.

The Gospel of John was actually written, in part, to combat that segment of church and society that had begun to associate sight, knowledge and faith in this idolatrous way. These people, who were later called Gnostics, believed that one could know God up close and personal, that one could have a personal hotline to Jesus and his power, that one could ascend to a direct knowledge of God through a secret path of wisdom which left behind the limitations and sufferings of the body and of ordinary life. To these beliefs and practices, John pronounced a resounding "NO!" No, he says, one may not escape the body and its sufferings, because even the divine one of God took on flesh and suffered like the rest of us. Indeed, John has the divinity or glory of God coming to light not in beatific visions

or specialist knowledge, but in the disfiguration of a crucified man, raised above the earth. Jesus is indeed the light of the world for John, but this light lies hidden in the enigma of suffering and of signs that are difficult to interpret. So faith is certainly not about seeing and knowing. On the contrary, as Jesus says to the disciple Thomas, “Blessed are those who do not see, and yet come to believe” (20. 29).

If only these Gnostic ideas had died out with the Gnostics. But they have not. They are alive and well and living in your local branch of Christian fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is dangerous to genuine faith because it has no humility. It believes not only in right doctrine, and the ability to *know without any form of doubt* what right doctrine is. It believes in wrong doctrine, and the ability to locate it in others. It believes that there is a war going on between believers and unbelievers, and that it can calmly discern the difference between the two. And it believes, finally, that God is on its own side, but not on theirs. Fundamentalism is based on a faith which can see and know, rather than on a faith which believes and trusts in a God who withdraws from our eyes in the figure of the suffering one.

Note this too, that fundamentalism is alive and well not only within the churches, but also beyond the church in the general community. It surfaces, for example, in the certainty of people who approach the church for a ritual service, in baptisms, weddings and funerals. Many of these folk get quite upset when the church will not order these services according to the customer’s already-determined demands and purposes. Why? Because, in many cases, the “customer” is a fundamentalist of the neo-pagan variety, who cannot accept that the church has a calling and a duty to resist this new kind of cultural orthodoxy in the name of Christ.

To these modern Gnostics, who ask as the Pharisees did, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus replies, “If you were blind you would not have sin, but now that you say ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” You see, for Christians the point is not to be able to see, but to believe that God sees us, not to claim a *certain, unassailable*, knowledge or experience of God, but to trust that *God knows us*. The interesting thing about light, as the writer to the Ephesians notes, is that it exposes and makes visible everything in the world but itself. So if Christ is the light of the world, we can trust him to make visible our own paths through life, including the sin that so easily entangles. But we should not expect to see or experience Christ with any sense of certainty until that day when he is revealed in all his fullness. To stare into the sun is to be blinded. But blindness, for Christians, is not such a

big deal. “Faith is the intimation of things not seen,” says the writer to the Hebrews (11.1). And Paul says something similar: “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5.7).

The life of faith turns out to be, then, not a full-colour motion picture for those who can see clearly, but a shadow play in which the fully sighted have no significant advantage over those who see not so well. The things of God are hidden in the enigmas of the world, in parables and signs which are difficult to interpret; and pre-eminently in the sufferings of Christ and those who suffer with him and for him by their baptism into his passion. Remember that the ‘healing’ our young man received was soon transmuted into persecution by those who refused to share his growing sense of faith.

So it is for all who are baptised into Christ’s ways. For that is the way of things in a world that prefers the light of the Television and the enlightenment of three-minute-interviews to the dark light of faith, hidden in the career of a suffering God. It is the world in which ministers of the gospel, no matter how hard we try to make ourselves understood, will only rarely be understood—because the people whom we address are blind to the God and gospel to which he is bearing witness. It is a world in which, as for the Jewish leaders in our story, the message of the gospel falls upon deaf ears because of this all-pervasive belief that God and the ways of faith are ours to possess and manipulate for the sake of our own consumer ends. In a world such as this, Christians are called not to know, but to be known, not to see, but to be seen by God, who gazes upon us with a love so wide and long and deep that it surpasses all our imaginings.

We lived in deeply uncertain times. The COVID-19 is only just beginning to bite, but it is being transmitted at an exponential rate consistent with a scenario in which our capacity to respond to all who are sick or dying will be quickly overwhelmed. What we ‘see’ and ‘know’ in this scenario is not at all comforting! Now is the time to actually activate our faith in a God who loves us. To look to Christ for a word of healing. For Christ has indeed promised to heal us, but not in the way a doctor might. The salve Christ offers is far more profound. Indeed, it is salv-ation. Salvation. A medicine that can revive and remake us even if we die. So do not fear. Do not fear even death. For the last enemy is death, and it has been overcome by Christ in his resurrection. Cling to him and you will be saved. Believe in him, and you will share his glory.

All glory be to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as in the beginning, so now, and forevermore.

**Garry Deverell**

Fourth Sunday of Lent 2020