

# Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2023 – Lent 4

*(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer)*

Readings: 1Samuel 16:1-13

**Psalm 23**

**Ephesians 5:8-14**

**John 9:1-41**

When Kate and I were on our honeymoon we spent one afternoon in a fantastic bookshop and each came away with something good to read. I bought the Penguin Book of Historic Speeches and found within it persuasive and well-crafted writing from a wide range of contexts and cultures. Since then I have bought five similar books which include speeches that have enlightened, critiqued, inspired, and eulogised. The speech writers have included religious and political leaders, kings and queens; social and environmental activists; and women, from around the world, seeking the right to vote.

Shakespearean quotes seem often to be re-worked and re-interpreted in different contexts, as do quotes and imagery from Biblical writing. A stand-out would be Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in which there is the biblical imagery of a man who claimed to have 'gone up the mountain', and seen 'the promised-land'. However, it's not just English and American writers who are worth remembering there are also some Australian politicians whose words resonate. I wonder if you can guess which Australian Prime Minister delivered these words?

*"...We simply cannot sweep injustice aside. Even if our own conscience allowed us to, I am sure, that in due course, the world and the people of our region would not. There should be no mistake about this – our success in resolving these issues will have a significant bearing on our standing in the world. However intractable the problems seem, we cannot resign ourselves to failure – any more than we can hide behind the contemporary version of Social Darwinism which says that to reach back for the poor and dispossessed is to risk being dragged down. That seems to me not only morally indefensible, but bad history..."*

These compelling thoughts were delivered by Paul Keating, in Redfern, when he was Prime Minister in 1992. Even though this speech was offered thirty years ago, there is still uncomfortable truth within them for us to consider.

There has been a trend in global political discourse over the last decade in which the focus has shifted to being less about addressing complex challenge, and more about blaming; less about policy and more about character assassination!

We might recognise something of this attitude in today's Gospel reading. In this we hear, at some length, about Jesus enabling a man to see for the first time. We are told that the man had been born blind, his eyes had never worked, and yet Jesus made it possible for him to see. We can only imagine the life transformation that came with this new ability for the man would have been able to live independently for the first time, and work for a living rather than relying on the good will of others. Why would observers not have said, 'Thank God!' or even some version of 'Wow!'

However, we are told that the Pharisees, one of the groups in Jewish society that took their faith in God most seriously were divided. The majority, it seems, condemned him suggesting that Jesus should not have healed on a Sabbath, because healing is a form of work and religious law stipulated that there should be no work done on the Sabbath!

So focussed were the Pharisees on keeping the Sabbath Law, and on ensuring others kept Sabbath Law, that they would not recognise the good that had happened. They could not acknowledge the activity of God before their eyes, in which a person had been physically healed in the most extraordinary way. It seems that their prejudice against Jesus was so strong they were unable to recognise good in him, and were unwilling to acknowledge God at work through him.

There is some resonance between the physical blindness of the man that was healed, and the metaphorical blindness of the Pharisees... who chose not to see.

We do have some sense about where the prejudice of the Pharisees ended. For eventually his death was organised – and, through this, his threat to their authority was eliminated. We might be tempted to think that we'd never be

like the Pharisees but the inclination to have prejudice is within all of us. It can be partly grounded in pride so we think, 'I am better than that person because...' or, 'My group is better than that person's group because.....!' It can also be grounded in jealousy so we think, 'I want what that person has... or, what that group has...' and will take it for my own, or destroy it, so that no one can have it!

Prejudice can also be grounded in fear - because that person, or that group, is different to who we are, and to the group we belong to. 'THEY' believe different things to us, have had different experiences of life; 'THEY' value different things to us... and, fundamentally..., 'WE' don't want to understand 'THEM'!

The Pharisees who observed the healing of the man born blind were unable to recognise the activity of God because of their prejudice, and so the road to crucifixion was devised. Some of our major political party leaders are unable to recognise good in the policies and work of their opposition because of prejudice, and so the road to sledging and character assassination is travelled.

What about you and me? What are the prejudices within us, and within the Church we are part, that need examination, and transformation? Who are the people we look down on? Who are the people we are jealous of? and, Who are the people we fear?

Even within and between church communities there can be prejudice. Over the last fifty years there has been significant transformation and healing in the prejudice that existed between Anglicans and Catholics, such that we now recognise clearly what we have in common. This has happened each denomination has been in dialogue with the p other for years seeking understanding; people have prayed together; people have shared meals together; people have shared ministry together.

Within the Anglican Communion, and within the National Anglican Church of Australia there is significant diversity and some of the theological differences have resulted in ongoing division and prejudice. I think we have each been guilty of labelling people, congregations, Parishes, and Dioceses in ways that diminish the other. And, like the Pharisees described in today's Gospel, we have

refused to recognise the activity of God in the lives and ministry of those who are different to us... even when the signs are very clear. The Scripture verse, 'Jesus wept!' seems relevant in response!

In the course of this week may God's Spirit help each of us recognise a personal prejudice that needs examination, repentance, and transformation. May we see more clearly the different ways that God is at work in the lives of those who differ from us, and recognise in them the neighbour we are called to love. We pray this in the name of the one who opened the eyes of the blind, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Possible focus questions for small group work or personal reflection:*

1. Who is the person, or what is the group, that you have prejudice against?
2. What are the reasons for this prejudice?
3. What might Jesus be saying to you about this?