



SUNDAY 22 MARCH 2020

DIOCESE OF Hexham & Newcastle

The Parishes of: Bishop Auckland || Newton Aycliffe & Shildon || Willington
Crook, Tow Law & Wolsingham || Tudhoe || Coundon, Ferryhill & Windlestone

ESCOMB PARTNERSHIP NOTE

4th Sunday of Lent (A): John 9: 1-41

“You’ll have had the experience. You notice something and ask “How long has that been there?” “At least 30 years”, comes the reply. But you’ve only just noticed or become aware of it. Folks, we do not see everything, and it often of course depends on what we’re looking for. We don’t use our eyesight to the full. Our observation skills fluctuate.

But imagine not ever having been able to see at all. It’s difficult for us. Today’s Gospel story puts us in touch with a man who was blind from birth. It seems his parents were an important part of his ability to manage. Like most blind people, his personal strategies of what works for him would get him through the day. On that day they brought him to Jesus.

We could talk about the spat the authorities had with the now-seeing man because he was healed on the Sabbath. We could also talk about the mistaken assumption that his blindness was a punishment for sin. But let’s instead think about the gift of sight and of our perceptions. Do we see only what we want to see? Are we sometimes in denial about things that are obvious to others?

In 1970 Ray Stevens gave us the song ‘Everything is Beautiful’ which contained the line ‘There is none so blind as he who will not see’. We may readily agree - about others, football referees included - but might be slow to acknowledge this about ourselves. Our perception is not necessarily fact. We see something and we give it meaning. There is no such thing as uninterpreted fact. Everything seen through our eyes is subjective. We are all blind to a degree. We do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.

The man in today’s Gospel story must have been bewildered in his happiness to have been given his sight. His life is now completely changed. Responsibilities and compliance will be demanded of him where previously concessions may have been made. Seeing has consequences - often immense. Many prefer to stay blind to things they’d rather not know about. Sometimes we don’t want to know. We like predictability. We like to inhabit our comfort zone and eliminate risk if we can. Perhaps we cruise on automatic pilot rather than being present in every moment to the wonder and demands of life.

The coronavirus is changing our world. Let’s hope we learn much that will endure about human solidarity and service in the middle of selfish panic buying and greed. We will not return to what was ‘normal’. Hopefully we’ll have seen things from which we learn. Perhaps the first thing the man born blind saw was the face of Jesus. It’s the purpose of all sight (and insight). To find in the features of another the humanity shared by Jesus and to honour it as he did, means we join this man in appreciating sight, darkness, colours and shape and become dedicated followers of the Lord. See?



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A message from Our Bishops

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, so many aspects of our lives must change. This includes the ways in which we publicly express our faith. It is very clear that, following official advice and in order to keep each other safe, save lives and support the NHS, at this time we must not gather for public acts of worship in our churches. This will begin from Friday evening, 20th March 2020, until further notice.

Our churches will remain open. They are not closing. They will be a focal point of prayer, where you will find solace and strength. In visiting our churches at this time, we will observe with great care the practices of hygiene and the guidance on social distancing.

However, the celebration of Mass, Sunday by Sunday and day by day, will take place without a public congregation.

Knowing that the Mass is being celebrated; joining in spiritually in that celebration; watching the live-streaming of the Mass; following its prayers at home; making an act of spiritual communion: this is how we share in the Sacrifice of Christ in these days. These are the ways in which we will sanctify Sunday, and indeed every day.

We want everyone to understand that in these emergency circumstances, and for as long as they last, the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is removed. This is, without doubt, the teaching of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2181). This pandemic is the 'serious reason' why this obligation does not apply at this time.

You will find more details about the pathway of prayer and sacramental life we are now to take in the accompanying document and on the Bishops’ Conference website (www.cbcew.org.uk). Your own bishop and parish priest will provide further support, encouragement and information about our way of prayer together in the coming weeks.

The second vital aspect of these challenging times is our care for each other. There are so many ways in which we are to do this: being attentive to the needs of our neighbour, especially the elderly and vulnerable; contributing to our local food banks; volunteering for charitable initiatives and organisations; simply keeping in touch by all the means open to us.

During these disturbing and threatening times, the rhythm of the prayer of the Church will continue. Please play your part in it. The effort of daily kindness and mutual support for all will continue and increase. Please play your part in this too. For your commitment to this, we thank you.

'The Lord is my shepherd, There is nothing I shall want.' May God bless us all.