

4th Sunday of Lent Year A

As Deacon Jim explained last week, we offer special prayers, the scrutinies, with those soon to be baptized, the elect, on these three Sundays in the middle of Lent. The gospels all show a deepening of the faith within those who encounter Christ: the woman at the well, the man born blind, and Lazarus brought back to life. The first readings continue a survey of Old Testament history, and today's passage is the pivotal consecration of Israel's greatest king.

Saul was the reigning king, but in his waning years he was not a very good king. Even though God had chosen Saul, even though Saul had been anointed the king, God chose a successor and commanded the prophet Samuel to seek him out. The Lord sends Samuel to Bethlehem to find Jesse, one of whose sons will become king. We Christians see the foreshadowing of another descendant in the line of Jesse, who will be born in Bethlehem and rule forever as Christ the King.

When Samuel arrives, Jesse and his sons come to offer sacrifice. The oldest and tallest of them, Eliab, immediately impresses Samuel. Samuel's eyes tell him this has to be the Lord's anointed one. But the Lord tells Samuel, "Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, because I have rejected him." Each of us can give examples of people we have judged favorably by how they look, only to learn, oh no, I was wrong. God explains to Samuel we humans see the appearance, "but the Lord looks into the heart."

So far, God's instructions to Samuel have been both specific and vague. At the beginning, the Lord told Samuel, fill a horn with oil and travel to a specific city and to a specific family. But as Samuel reviews the sons of Jesse, the Lord gives vague information, just no. Samuel is getting nowhere, so he asks Jesse a question that surely must have surprised this father of seven sons and who knows how many daughters? Samuel asks, "Are these all the sons you have?"

Jesse surely loved all his children, but the youngest and most inexperienced was tending sheep, a task not requiring great skill. At Samuel's request, Jesse sends for the boy. As soon as he appears, the Lord again gives specific instructions: "There—anoint him, for this is the one!" And in the last words of this reading we hear the name of that son, David.

The man born blind in the gospel symbolized the blindness of those with healthy eyes who could not see who Jesus was. Jesse could not see who David was. As our elect prepare for their baptism, they pray that their eyes may open wider to see Christ, whom they wish to follow. On the day of their baptism, they too will be anointed with holy chrism, and as "the spirit of the Lord rushed upon David" at his anointing, so the Holy Spirit will rush upon them in their confirmation.

For the rest of us who have been baptized and confirmed, these passages remind us that we have opened our eyes to gaze upon Christ, and we have been anointed with the Spirit. God expects us to use our eyes to see Christ where others may not. Whenever we find ourselves judging people by their gender, color of skin, age, job or appearance, we come dangerously close to the actions of Jesse, who could not see the potential in one of his own children. God has given us eyes, not just to see the world, but to see Christ.