

A Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Lent, March 2, 2008
Immanuel Episcopal Church, Hanover County
by The Reverend David H. Knight, Associate Rector

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son, Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

As I look back over some 37 years of parish ministry I can think of those who, as that wonderful prayer in the Prayer Book describes, have been choice vessels of God's grace, and lights of the world in their several generations. "Lights of the world in their several generations..." The memory of one dear lady in particular came to my mind as I began to reflect once again, on the gospel for today. Etched in my memory forever are some of the visits I had with her in her room at the Nursing home where she spent the last years of her life. Her name was Mary McCulloch. She was in her '90's when I first began to visit her. I would knock on her door. She would invite me in. She would be sitting in her comfortable chair in the corner by the window. "It's so nice to see you", she would say. Her room was bright and cheerful, a pale blue, if I remember correctly, with pretty blue accents as blue was her favorite color. On the wall and on her bureau were pictures of family taken over the years. In the course of our visits Mary would point to the various pictures and talk about her family with great affection. Virtually all of them had died as she was one of the very last of her immediate family. Very often, she would say how much she enjoyed reading our parish weekly newsletter as she had been a life-long member of the congregation. One time in particular, she spoke of her interest, even her excitement about the discussion that was taking place as we were in the process of moving the altar away from the wall. While there were members of the congregation who were not at all happy at the possibility of moving the altar, Mary was very supportive. Her comment was, I can see how it makes sense." On another visit, as I entered her room, she pointed to some flowers she had been given. "Aren't they beautiful!" she exclaimed. Aren't the colors just beautiful! When Mary spoke to you she looked straight at you with a grace and dignity in her beautiful face that was radiant. She was certainly a light to the world and had been over several generations. There was something else about her. Mary McCulloch was blind, physically blind, that is. She had been blind for many years. In fact, her physical blindness was such that she was unable to distinguish light and darkness. She never once complained. She found ways to see life from the eyes of her memory, from the eyes of what people would read to her, from the eyes of what she heard as she listened intently to others, and, I suspect, from the eyes of Jesus from whom she derived much strength. Physically blind as she was, she still could see with her mind and with her heart. Not only did the light shine into her mind and into her heart as she took in all that she could from her surroundings, but the light also shined forth from her mind and from heart as she was always open to new insight. An amazing lady she was. Those whose lives she touched were grateful for the wonderful grace and virtue of this dear soul who was a choice vessel of God's grace, and certainly a light to us all.

Sometimes, as Sister Judith Schenck writes in speaking of today's Gospel, blind is not really blind, and seeing is not really sight. Each of us has a blindness of some kind or another. In the gospels, there are numerous accounts of how Jesus opened the eyes of the blind. We all have our blind spots. There are ways that you and I view certain things. Sometimes it is very hard

to see them any other way. Many things can cause our blind spots. There are those times when, for one reason or another, you and I can have a blindness of heart. It's a terrible kind of blindness. When you and I are blind of heart we can't love others and we can't even love ourselves. Sometimes, and to no avail, when one is blind of heart one can become obsessed with material things, even with work, anything in an attempt to fill in the empty holes.

There can be the blindness of the soul. This is a terrible kind of blindness because it can wrap our entire lives in a gloomy darkness. As I think of Mary McCulloch, her soul was enlightened. She lived each day, not in what could have been the gloomy darkness of her physical blindness, but rather in the light of God's grace and love.

God is calling you and me, by virtue of our baptism, to be lights of the world in our generation. We become lights in the world only as the light of Christ shines in us in some way and as we live as children of light, as Paul describes in today's epistle reading. To be children of light is to be healed from our blindness whatever that blindness might be. Lent is a time for you and me to reflect upon our own blind spots and to have the grace to seek God's guidance that the scales may be lifted from our eyes and that we may see more clearly what God is calling us to see. I can't recall now who said it, but somebody once said that we often see what we are looking for. If, for example, we are looking these days for the demise of the Episcopal Church in the midst of all the controversy we may find it, especially if we take to heart the accounts of the news media. If, however, we are looking for signs of faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and hope for the present and future of the Church, we will certainly find it in places all over where mission and ministry is taking place in ways that are bringing hope and life and where God is changing lives. In this light, I cannot help quoting one of my favorite Saints, Cyprian, who said back in the 4th Century, "The Church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers, and it will continue to do so, for it is God's Church and not ours, and the Gates of Hell will not prevail against it." Jesus, no doubt, has always seen, and must weep at the blindness in the Church at times, yet he is ever inviting us to see others as he would see them. He invites you and me to see the world as he sees it. In today's Gospel he is telling us that our blindness is an opportunity for God to work in us. In another translation of this passage, "It is not that this man sinned, or his parents. but that works of God might be made manifest in him." The word "manifest" means to be revealed, to be seen, to be visible. It is when light shines upon a situation and we have a new vision, and when that happens, so often our hearts are changed and we see something in a new way. The wonderful thing is, once we are enlightened, we can never go back.

What are the blind spots that you and I have that Jesus might see in us? What might those things be which Jesus invites us to view with open eyes? Lent is a good time, though certainly not the only time, when we can reflect upon and, perhaps, identify those blind spots. Some of these will be found in the places where we might have lost hope, and we have become blind to God's power to heal and bring hope. May the remaining weeks of this Lent find you with a restored vision of God's grace in you life and in the lives of those around us. We will find what we are looking for in the world around us. If we are eagerly looking for hope rather than despair, Jesus will give us what he gave to the blind man. He will give us new eyes, new insight, new vision and new understanding.

As you go out into the duties and the challenges of this week, as well as the pleasures, as you look for hope in the midst of all that life brings, may the light of Christ restore your sight in some place in your life in which you have experienced a blindness for, as Saint Paul reminds us, once we were once in darkness, but now you and I can live as children of light. *Amen.*

