11 March 2018: Matins
The Fourth Sunday of Lent
Psalm 23; 1 Samuel 16: 1–13; John 9: 1–25
The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity
‘All the Light We Cannot See’

Inside your head is dark, very dark – like going down a manhole in the street to the warren of tunnels beneath or entering a cavern deep underground. No light penetrates our heads from the outside world. No sound enters it either. Both the light we see and the sounds we hear are constructed through the myriad and delicate messaging systems in our brain, communicating to every other part of our bodies. Scientists estimate that of the various waves out there in which we are emerged, human beings have access to only 10\textsuperscript{th} of a trillioneth of them. There’s a lot happening in the world then that we just don’t and can’t process.

The American novelist, Anthony Doerr, puts this well in the title of his 2015 Pulitzer prize winning novel, 

“All the Light We Cannot Not See.” It’s a beautiful story of two young adults caught up in the Second World War. On the one hand, there’s Werner, a German orphan who, as a child, labours in the mines and then, due to his interest and technical know-how with radios, becomes a signal man in Hitler’s army. On the other, there’s Marie-Laure, a girl blind since the age of six whose father makes her models of the cities where they live so she can get out and negotiate the world around her. Slowly, as the two distinct plots of their lives develops, they are brought together as teenagers through the bombing of Saint-Malo where Marie-Laure is living alone on the top floor of the empty house. They are brought together through radio signals: for Marie-Laure listens to music and broadcasts in English and Werner has been tasked with tracking down the enemy radio in the town that might give away the positions of the German troops to the allied bombers. I’m not going to give away any further details of the plot, other than to say an impossible friendship brings them together and while Werner is killed in the allied bombing, he saves Marie-Laure.
Rather like the ending of Stephen Spielberg’s wonderful film, *Saving Private Ryan*, the last scene takes place when Marie-Laure is old. “She lives to see the century turn,” the novelist writes, “She lives still.” But her mind continually returns to the miracle of that friendship borne out of and along the airwaves with someone she never saw. Everyday, she thinks, people with those memories of the war are dying. She too will die. Werner died. But her memories and thoughts are not sad ones. As each of these people “fall out of the world. We rise again in the grass. In the flowers. In songs.”

I am not going to comment on the theology behind the novel. If it has any profundity that profundity lies in what is not explicitly said. It lies in the long arc of time in which somehow, unseen, there remains a beauty and a grace – despite the horrors, the violence, and the brutality. Neither am I wishing this morning to offer bland placebos. If Julian of Norwich is right in her vision and understanding that “All shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well,” then we can trust in and commend each other to God. But we don’t control the operations of grace and redemption. We too have surrender ourselves to *All the Light We Cannot See* because this is the human condition.

But I think both what scientists tell us about the limitations of human perception and Anthony Doerr’s story of Werner and Marie-Laure can help us to understand our Biblical readings this morning. Because in both passages – Samuel setting out to anoint a new king, the Lord having rejected Saul, and the man born blind receiving back his sight – there is a Biblical and theological principle about the work of grace and the providential operations of God in bringing about the redemption of human beings. The principle in this: we take a walk in the invisible in obedience to the limited understanding we have but also in the hope that God will meet us in that walk and bring to pass something redemptive and healing. So Samuel has to set off with his horn full of oil and he’s even given a direction – Bethlehem – but it’s only when he has set off that the next steps (taken blindly) will be revealed. “Then I will show you what you must do,” the Lord tells Samuel. And indeed when Samuel comes to Bethlehem and meets Jesse’s sons, thinking in turn, that each of them must be the one he must anoint, the Lord informs him directly: “Pay no attention to outward appearance and stature…The Lord does not see as a mortal sees; mortals see only appearances.” And Samuel is taken to the very end of what is possible by human sight – “Are these all the sons you have?” – before the way forward is revealed and there is a fruitful end to his journeying.
I see the same pattern in the man born blind in the reading from John’s Gospel. He is not told he has been born blind for a reason – that God might be glorified. Only the disciples are told that by Jesus. A man comes up to him, spits on the ground, smears mud across his eyes and tells him to go and wash them in the pool of Siloam. I can’t think what I would have done or, rather more said, to anyone doing that to me. But then I would have seen the man approach with intent and I would have fled. This man didn’t see Jesus’s rather elaborate preparations. They just happen to him. But something of being in the darkling presence of Jesus and something about the tone of that sending him to wash, triggers an act of trust. So, presumably, he fumbles and staggers his way to the pool of Siloam, gropes his way down the flights of stone steps to the water, and is obedient. It is in being obedient that he comes to see; his sight is restored, and the will and power of God comes to its perfect realization.

The way of Christ, Christ as the way, means a fumbling forward. We may have ambitions, we may have personal targets and goals, we may be driven, we may have a diary full of appointments and plans – and while God may work through some of it, most of the time we don’t know where we’re going. We walk on water; but walk we must. I think of Private Ryan, in Spielberg’s film, who, 50 years later, returns to the French countryside having been saved from the annihilations that took place in all the battles fought there. It’s summer, the grass is green, and the trees thick with leaves. He stands among the company of men he was plucked from, all buried now in serried ranks of uniform tombstones. He still has no idea why he was saved while all these others perished; why God’s grace meant one fate for him and an entirely different fate for all these others. Looking down at those graves he makes a single request of God: “Tell me I have led a good life…tell me I’m a good man.”