'There are none so blind as those that will not see'. This proverb, which can be traced to Tudor England, has its biblical roots in Jeremiah Chapter 5: ‘You foolish and senseless people, who have eyes yet do not see’. Our epistle this morning contains a testimony of one man - Saul of Tarsus - who for a period definitely fell into this category. It is sobering to recognise that even those with exemplary credentials, in respectable positions, can have blind spots, either through ignorance or design! This is so, not just in religious matters but across the whole spectrum of public life. One can be upstanding in one's field, be known for one's professional competence, yet still be stubbornly, wilfully blind in the conduct of business and also in personal relationships.

It has always been so. We are appalled at the political and commercial advocacy for slavery in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, yet the International Justice Mission estimates that more than 40 million are enslaved today, exploited through sexual trafficking, forced labour and domestic servitude. I wonder what other blind spots exist within society today? They could be physical, reflected by our inadequate care for the environment; or systemic, given the advanced market economies that are neither able nor willing to close the poverty gap; perhaps also philosophical, in the way that we may have allowed the goal of radical personal autonomy to override the core requirements of community; we’ve learnt a great deal about institutional blindness in recent years: particularly concerning racism and, within the church, the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. There will be more this week on this latter subject, following the publication of the Independent Inquiry into Child and Sexual Abuse. But it’s also personal: I met a former Foreign Secretary signing copies of his book on hubris who wryly observed how well qualified he was to write it. It’s worth taking time ourselves to reflect, and to ask God to reveal the details and roots of any personal myopia. Our prejudices may be absorbed through early family life, taught within the educational system, reinforced through peer and media influence, or perhaps chosen for our own advancement.
Saul of Tarsus was so focussed that he lost perspective. Just like the tenant farmers in our Gospel reading who sought to gain so much yet forfeited everything, Saul had become so religious that he nearly lost his soul - so single-minded that he persecuted the one he sought to worship. Now Society does need its radicals and prophets. How else will our behavioural patterns be disrupted, our value judgements challenged and our vision enlightened? But to be idealistic in belief and zealous in practice is a dangerous combination, distorting our vision – that is, unless it is founded in spiritual truth.

It is ironic that the transformation of Saul’s spiritual vision stems from the period of his physical blindness. Following his dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, all his considerable passion and intellectual energy is now directed to the service of his Lord. In the autobiographical passage that we heard this morning, he is writing to the people of Philippi, a city fiercely proud of its right to Roman citizenship, and to a church that is in danger of practicing a religion of form, not substance. Paul, with a change of name that symbolises his newfound mission to the Gentiles, is probably under house arrest yet writes with such freedom! He looks to persuade his readers that we cannot earn our citizenship of heaven through human agency; rather our faith is received through the grace of Jesus alone. He offers a stark contrast between the efforts of his former self and the gift of his present status: ‘As to righteousness under the law, I was faultless…but whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.’ I used to think that I could have been a friend of Saul: born into a Christian country; a child of the vicarage; an altar boy, chorister and 1st acolyte. I could go on: baptised the day I was born, confirmed by the age of 10, awarded the RE prize at school, weekends at Walsingham, commemoration days at Mirfield, holidays in a convent, an Archdeacon as a Godfather. Some of my more catholic friends have said, where did it all go wrong?! No, it was all very good – the point is, it’s not about styles and preferences in religious practice – as Paul discovered, it’s about encountering mercy, grace and power of the risen Lord as he reveals himself to us. For me, it was as a university student that I significantly recognised Jesus to be a most merciful redeemer, friend and brother.

This is a message that gets under the skin. It is both unnerving yet liberating: unnerving because it confronts us with the limitations of unredeemed humanity, exposing our inability to be self-sufficient; liberating, by extending the gift of divine restoration in person of Jesus. It is also deeply challenging in that it calls us to radical Christian living. As I came down from university my motto became that of Paul: ‘I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection…’. What I couldn’t do, for a long time, was to embrace the next phrase: ‘and the sharing of his sufferings’. Because to take hold of the gift of life in Jesus requires us also to share the heart of God, his pain and his
compassion, not least in the present circumstances of a global pandemic. As Psalm 68 puts it: he is ‘a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows; he sets the lonely in families and leads forth the prisoners with singing. Praise be to the Lord, to God our saviour; who daily bears our burdens.’

So how is your vision in 20:20? This is a journey for a lifetime and into eternity, a fact acknowledged by St Paul: ‘Not that I have obtained all this but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own’. As a Cathedral community we honour St Frideswide, whose shining vision for Christ was contrasted with the blindness of her would-be captor. We look to serve our college, our city, diocese and beyond in Christ’s name. Our diocesan family has similarly committed itself to become ‘a Christ-like Church for the sake of God’s world: contemplative, compassionate and courageous’. We can only fulfil this vision if we rely on his all-sufficient grace. So Let us press on, but not just in our own strength, but rather fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith.

**The Prayer of St Benedict of Nursia:**

O gracious and holy Father,
Give us wisdom to perceive you,
Diligence to seek you,
Patience to wait for you,
Eyes to behold you,
Hearts to meditate upon you
And lives to proclaim you;
Through the power of the Spirit
Of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.