

## **Don't judge a book by its cover** by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: (Genesis 45:1-15); Matthew 15:10-28

Year A, Proper 15

### **Introduction**

“Don't judge a book by its cover” – I wonder whether this is a phrase you have used, one which expresses your thoughts about judging others? We all have a tendency to make judgements about other people, based on first impressions, how they look, how they speak, how they dress.

Just for a moment, I'd like to invite you to take part in a little exercise – don't worry, you won't have to tell anyone what you have been thinking! You might like to close your eyes, and I want you to imagine that just now someone comes in at the back of the church, someone you would least expect to come to a service here. Picture this person – how old are they? How are they dressed? Think about their appearance. Why are you surprised to see this person? What do you think their home is like? Who lives with them? What job do they do, if they have one? What sort of personality do they have? Would you describe them as a “nice” person? Why, or why not?

OK, you can open your eyes. Like I said, I won't ask you to describe what you've been thinking.

## **The friendly young baby-killer**

One of the common things we are inclined to do is to think negatively about a person based on their appearance. But in this week's news story about the serial killer Lucy Letby<sup>1</sup>, the opposite was the case. At the time the babies in the Countess of Chester Hospital died, Lucy was a young, friendly, good-looking nurse in her mid-twenties. When hospital consultants saw that all the baby deaths occurred while Lucy was working in the neonatal unit, managers refused to believe Lucy could have had anything to do with it, and took no action. In fact, they even told the consultants to apologise to Lucy. As a consequence, more babies lost their lives.

It has been suggested that this horrific case might well shake many people's faith in human nature. As Christians, we may also be shocked at the wickedness of the crimes Lucy committed, but I hope we have understood enough about the Christian doctrine of sin to realise that, while we are all made in the image of God, we also seem to have an in-built tendency to do what is wrong, not just by mistake, but deliberately. We all need redeeming, restoring, and sanctifying.

### **Clean or unclean?**

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew tackles both the issue of human sinfulness and our potential for greatness. It includes two episodes. In the first, Jesus has just been asked

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-65960514>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023

by some Pharisees why his disciples don't follow the "tradition of the elders", that is, the customs that had been developed over the years to make sure that people put the Jewish Law, given through Moses, into practice. The disciples of Jesus didn't carry out the ritual washing of hands before eating, which at the time had nothing to do with hygiene but everything to do with ritual purity. It's another veiled attack on Jesus, just like the criticism that he associates with people clearly identified as "sinners" – including tax collectors and prostitutes. If Jesus claims to be a teacher from God, why doesn't he make sure his disciples follow the religious traditions? The question comes from people who are sure of their own piety, and are quick to criticise others.

Jesus, in response, lays into the Pharisees about their hypocrisy. Our reading begins as Jesus turns to the crowd, saying that "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles". He goes on to explain that what you say indicates what is in your heart, and if there is evil lurking there, that's what makes you unclean or impure in the eyes of God, not whether you've carried out a ritual hand-washing.

Jesus is clearly annoyed, or perhaps exasperated, with the Pharisees. They see themselves as people who are pure in the eyes of God because they keep an abundance of regulations, designed to ensure that the Law is kept in every aspect of life. On the surface, they seem to be holier than most other people. But, Jesus says, they are hypocrites, because they are actually neglecting the very principles of

caring for others which the Jewish Law requires. Later, in chapter 23, he has more criticism of them.

## **The Pharisees and us**

It's tempting to assume we're not at all like the Pharisees. After all, we don't follow all the regulations which they did. But, to give the Pharisees credit, they were genuinely trying to live pure and holy lives, through attending to a plethora of minute details of behaviour. Jesus' criticism in today's passage is that they are blind – they just can't see that by giving all their attention to minor rituals and practices they are failing to check whether they are actually fulfilling the commandment to love their neighbour as themselves.

In the same way, we need to examine ourselves. Outwardly, I'm sure we all seem like pretty decent people. We go to church, pray, and generally try to be nice to others in our day-to-day lives. But what selfish desires and attitudes lie within? How much is our kindness and generosity determined by our own comfort and security? What sacrifices do we make to further God's kingdom and to make this world a better place? When we stand before God at the end of our lives, will he see a heart that is totally committed to him, evidenced by real deeds of generosity and kindness? Will he say "well done, good and faithful servant?"

## **The Gentile woman**

In the second part of our gospel reading, Jesus meets a woman who outwardly has none of the good qualities of the Pharisees. Matthew describes her as "a Canaanite", which is a rather strange term for New Testament times. The word

has all the associations of the idolatrous paganism that the ancient people of Israel were warned to have nothing to do with.

But you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. This unknown Gentile woman cries out to Jesus with the words, "Son of David", a clear recognition that he is the Jewish Messiah.

Jesus has gone to Phoenicia, a country outside of Israel, perhaps to get a break from the relentless demands of the crowds for healings. His mission, as he sees it, is "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Once he has fulfilled his mission as Israel's Messiah, the Kingdom of God will be opened up to the Gentiles. But not yet. So Jesus seems to ignore the woman's entreaties until she throws herself at his feet. Her response to his comment about not throwing the children's bread to the dogs shows her persistence, but also her faith. Jesus is full of praise for the faith and love that are in her heart. And immediately her daughter is healed.

Am I prepared to see faith and love in unexpected places? Am I willing to recognise it in people who I wouldn't consider "proper Christians"? Might it be the case that there are people outside of our church circles who have more faith in God, and are more persistent in putting it into practice, than some of our church regulars? Or even than me?

### **God knows**

I think the main message I get from today's Gospel reading is that God knows what is in our hearts. He's not deceived by outward appearances, whether they look good to the world or not. He can tell the heart that is pure, loving, committed

and faithful, from the person who goes through the motions, does a bit of good here or there, but is not wholeheartedly committed to him.

Perhaps our response to today's message might be to spend some time reading Psalm 139, and join with the psalmist in the prayer at the end of the psalm. I'll read it now, and then let's spend a few moments reflecting on what the Holy Spirit is saying to us about what is truly in our hearts:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 139:23-24 NRSV