

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Pentecost 3 Year B

1 Sam. 15:34-16:13; Ps. 20; 2 Cor. 5:6-10 (11-13) 14-17; Mk. 4:26-34 Tannum 13/06/2021

All of us would be familiar with the old adages: “Appearances can be deceiving—never judge a book by its cover—looks are only skin deep.” I’m sure that most, if not all of you here today have experienced—either negatively or positively—the truth of these adages, which are grounded in the Bible.

The story is told of a very hard-nosed and prudent boss, by the name of Mr. Swiller. Mr. Swiller used to watch his employers like a hawk. One day when he was making one of his regular tours of the factory, he spotted a young man leaning against a pile of boxes just outside the foreman’s office. Since George, the foreman, wasn’t around, Swiller stood off to the side and watched to see just how long the young man would stand around doing nothing.

The young man yawned, scratched his head, looked at his watch, and sat on the floor. He took out a nail file and began cleaning his nails. Then he stretched, yawned again, and leaned back on the pile of boxes.

Swiller stepped from his hiding place and walked up to the young man. “You!” he boomed. “How much do you make a week?”

The young man looked up indifferently. “Two hundred and fifty dollars,” he said.

Swiller swooped into the cashier’s office, took \$250 from the cash box, and returned. “Take it,” he said, “and get out! Don’t let me see you around here again!”

The young man took the cash, put it in his pocket, and left. Swiller snorted at his lack of remorse or embarrassment—or any other feeling. Then he went looking for George. When he found him, Swiller was red with anger. “That idler in front of your office,” Swiller said. “I just gave him a week’s pay and fired him. What’s the matter with you, letting him stand around as though he had nothing to do?”

“You mean the kid in the red shirt?” George asked.

“Yes! The kid in the red shirt!”

“He was waiting for the twenty dollars we owe him for lunch,” George said. “He works for the coffee shop around the corner.”

Appearances are deceiving—never judge a book by its cover—looks are only skin deep.

This morning, as we look at both our Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel and our New Testament reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, we find that these adages are once again affirmed.

In the first reading, we listened to the story of the anointing of David as king by the prophet Samuel. It’s a story filled with political intrigue and surprise. Samuel, regretting having anointed Saul as king, goes to Bethlehem under the divine decoy plan of offering a sacrifice. His real reason for going there was to carry out God’s directive to anoint a son of Jesse, whom God shall show Samuel. We are surprised to learn that the most obvious sons are turned down.

Why? Well, there are at least two reasons. The stated reason comes from the voice of the Lord to Samuel in verse seven: *“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”* Then, after all Jesse’s sons present are rejected, the youngest son is fetched and Samuel is told by God to *“Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.”* God’s omniscience—his all-knowing capacity to see into the heart—the true essence and character of a person—causes him to choose David as king—likely much to the shock and surprise of everyone else.

The second reason that the other sons are turned down is more implicit in this story. And that is, that throughout the Scriptures, God is often shown to favour and bless the least likely—those who are excluded by the majority because they are considered too young for the job at hand. As Jesus also said: *“The last shall be first, and the first last.”* We see this in the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. And in the New Testament, we find it well represented in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Today’s passage from 2 Corinthians also connects us in a similar way as this story of God choosing David. The apostle Paul is speaking about his longing to leave this life and be with Christ in heaven. The key to understanding what Paul is saying here is found in verse seven, where he says: *“for we walk by faith, not by sight.”*

We quite often say, “Yes, I’ve heard of that person but I don’t know him by sight,” or, “I’ve spoken to her on the phone, but I don’t know her by sight.” Our knowledge of God is similarly “not by sight.” Our knowledge of Jesus is “not by sight.” We do, of course, know so much of Jesus, both historically through the Gospels, and in the present by his Spirit, that seeing him, marvellous though it would be, would simply confirm what we already know. Nevertheless, seeing is what we long for, and the promise of it gives us confidence.

This is one of Paul’s great pieces of wisdom. Paul knows that if we base our understanding of something from what is seen—from appearances—we will be misled about what’s important and what is truly going on. It’s easy to misunderstand people and situations when all we see are the externals or when we make assumptions from only superficial knowledge of the person or situation—just like Jesse would have expected Samuel to choose his eldest son to be anointed as king—certainly not David, the youngest.

It’s the same with God’s purposes. We don’t make our own decision about Jesus, purely by what we read in the gospel accounts of his life. Conclusions and conjecture based purely on external, superficial information or impressions will often prove wrong. So, what is Paul talking about?

In the first instance, Paul is talking about the dichotomy we face, as Christians, that, on the one hand, we yearn to be with Christ in heaven, yet on the other hand, are called to continue dwelling in our earthly bodies. From the human perspective, we live each day in our earthly bodies, yet from a heavenly perspective, we are destined to be with Christ. For Paul, being in the body is at the same time being with the Lord. What we see on the outside; that is the physical body, does not indicate what’s going on, on the inside; that is, spiritual renewal and presence with the Lord.

This dichotomy between faith and sight is displayed in the difference between our outer and inner selves. The renewal of our inner life can take place in the presence of huge problems that bear externally upon us. Paul encourages us that our spiritual lives are not governed or defined by what is happening around us—or even by what is happening to our bodies—but by what God is doing from the inside. Paul’s concern is what is happening in our hearts. And it’s what’s happening in our hearts that gives us the confidence to continue, what Paul refers to as our “ministry of reconciliation.”

Last week's reading from 2 Corinthians, addresses Paul's, "slight and momentary afflictions". Although we may suffer during this life, that suffering cannot be compared to the glory that is on offer to us in heaven, when we are finally present with the risen Christ for all eternity. For Paul, it would be great if we could be there now, but for our sakes and for the sake of the kingdom, we continue in our present state. As Paul says, *"For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who dies and was raised for them."*

It is for this reason that, as Paul says, *"...we regard no one from a human point of view."* What this means is: Because Christ has died for all, everyone is to be treated differently than they were before—in human terms—whether they have responded to Christ's death and resurrection, or not. All of our relationships must be governed by the fact that Christ has died for all, and are each valued and treated accordingly. When we meet anyone, no matter who they are, we must always remember that this too is a person for whom Christ has died.

Just as God does not view us by what he sees externally but by what is in our hearts, so we are not to view the world around us as the rest of the world does—by externals. What people see of us on the outside is not necessarily indicative of what God is doing, on the inside—within our hearts. So also, we are to judge others, not according the human values—by externals, but by God's values—by the heart.

We also do not judge the state of the church as the world does. This is a real issue for us—when people measure success by growing numbers, the hustle and bustle of collective enthusiasm, and, not least, a healthy budget? These are all possible outcomes of authentic ministry. But they are also all ambiguous, as Paul found at Corinth. What Paul inspires us to do is to keep returning to the way of compassion and vulnerability—to keep returning to the heart of the matter—God's love and forgiveness.

God loves each and every person quite unconditionally. The good news is that this includes you and me, despite all of our fears and frustrations—despite how we might appear on the outside—for the Lord looks on the heart—we in turn are asked to walk by faith, not by sight. Though we may battle with many fears and struggles, let us bring them to God and ask God to help us place all of our trust in him.

To God be all praise, honour and glory. Amen.