

## ***Judging and measuring***

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22nd February 2004, last Sunday in Epiphany

*Genesis 45: 3-11, 15; Psalm 37: 1-11, 40-41; 1 Cor: 15: 35-40; Lk 6:27-38*

Today is the last Sunday in the Epiphany Season that, as Rob has been patiently explaining over the past few weeks, is the season where we hear stories that reveal Jesus' nature. So it's appropriate that today we also celebrate the Transfiguration because this is surely the big Mamma of all the epiphany experiences. The Transfiguration, of course, was that strange experience up on Mt Tabor where three of the apostles got to see a shining Jesus talking with a shining Elijah and a shining Moses, and then an overshadowing cloud comes and says "this is my son." I've always considered it the oddest single incident in the gospel, mainly because it's so dramatic, yet largely unexplained.

Today's rather dense gospel is part 2 of the Sermon on the Plain. It's a good place to start an ascent up Mt Tabor, because it so clearly points us to many of the issues tied up with how we judge and measure the world.

Towards the end of today's gospel, Jesus says:

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give and it shall be given to you."

As so often seems to be the case, Jesus is telling us to do things that go completely against the grain of almost all of our natural inclinations.

I know that I am constantly judging things, situations and people not always condemning, I hope, but certainly judging. Sometimes this is overt, and I have a dim awareness of myself clambering up into the judge's chair to make a pronouncement. But sometimes my judgements sort of sneak up on me. A hopefully uncontroversial (!) example may help us explore this.

Let's say a new parishioner (to make it a little more personal let's call her Susan) one week after joining us at St Philip's, came in with a gift of half a dozen of those plastic green chairs for the parish.

Now, quite a few people might respond by thinking, "Isn't that nice. I like those plastic green chairs. They are light and stackable and flexible. They fit comfortably on the back, and surely they help St Philip's to convey a welcoming image at morning teas and concerts. And that green colour seems to go so well with so many things." These people would probably then go on with, now I think that Susan seems like such a nice person.

Some other people, though, might think "Oh dear. More of those tacky plastic green chairs. What an environmental nightmare. How can anyone find them comfortable with that silly curve in the back! The shed is already full of them. And how is this going to fit in with St Philip's image of an aware and sensitive parish?" These people might go on, perhaps a little guiltily with, "And what an odd thing to do. What is she doing giving us these monstrosities one week after joining us. I wonder whether she is maybe trying to buy her way into our good books with pointless gifts."

Now the point of this example is not to debate the merits of plastic green chairs. (We can do that at morning tea!) But it will, I hope, help to draw out some things.

First, we often don't see how our judgemental machinery kicks in automatically when things happen, and how our judgements are almost always a part of a long chain. In my example, the

judgements about Susan turned to a fair extent on people's attitudes towards something as trivial as plastic green chairs. But whether you like plastic green chairs probably turns on lots of other past experiences. It may even be something as obscure as whether one summer's day when you were a child someone you liked brought you a chair to sit on and ever since you associate chairs with nice experiences and nice people.

And this kind of chain leads into the future too. Susan may months later find herself being favoured or shunned for what to her may see no apparent reason, and thinking, "What was that all about?"

This chain of judgements is, of course, usually not made with the clarity I suggested earlier. Some people may have suddenly found themselves affirming or disapproving of Susan not quite knowing why.

This also happens because our judgements are tied in with our feelings and moods. If you're in a good mood, you may have easily gone down the path of thinking Susan was generous. If you were in a bad mood, it's easier to be suspicious.

There's an underlying pattern here. I notice something (and even what I notice is filtered by my past). Then I have some kind of initial response to it. Then thoughts about it come up. Then sometimes I find myself running a commentary on it. Then I pass judgement. It's a sequence that happens over and over again. And the steps happen so quickly that I usually don't notice them, or even the fact that I am passing a judgement.

Now at this point, you might say, "Well, so what?" That's the way our minds work. And surely we need to make judgements to function in the world.

Well, yes, at one level. In fact, Jesus has not explicitly ruled out judgement. But he what he said was that your judgements come back to you. And in John's gospel he says, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement." (7:24)

One of the things I actually find disconcerting about this example is how automatically my judgemental machinery swings into action and how it so easily gets caught up in the appearances created by my own filters and fantasies. And how difficult it then becomes to "judge with right judgement."

Just consider, in the example, who was actually making the judgement about Susan? On both the for and against sides, was it a conscious, considered, objective judgement, or was it just the end result of a mental process which sort of developed a momentum of its own?

And if the result depends on our personal pasts, or moods, then how reliable is our judgement? Actually, I can't see anything inherently wrong with the reasoning in either the pro-Susan or the anti-Susan camp, and in fact both sides might be right, particularly if she is a complex character!

And perhaps this also helps us to notice that, in fact, we have no idea what was going on in Susan's mind at the time. But it doesn't stop us passing judgement on her. We make our own inferences about what we think she is up to based on our expectations and how we feel.

The awkward fact is that our judgements, particularly about other people, are often not very reliable even when they seem entirely reasonable to us. Jesus pointedly continues in the verses following today's gospel with the parable of the blind leading the blind, and our fondness for pointing out the motes in the eyes of others while not even seeing the logs in our own.

Even more disconcertingly, all this suggests just how so much of our experience of life is not the actual experience itself, but rather what we add into it by all of our own likes and dislikes

and reactions and judgements and the stories we spin. If we just say, “so what”, then these processes within us will just keep on blindly rolling along. Sometimes the judging machinery will work for us. But other times it will lead us, and very often other people, into a ditch.

This is in part because the urge to judge is very sneaky. All too often I know I rationalise my desires by blaming or putting down other people or labelling them. This is in part a convenient mechanism for trying to get what I want without having to take on the associated guilt, and for building up my sense of self at their expense. It also enables me to project onto someone or something else how I am feeling. And all too often I pass judgement because of that little burst of ego pleasure from having made what I think is a correct call. I wonder whether those of us who identified with the ‘I like Susan’ camp picked up on a faint glow of smugness in the background of our minds: Thank goodness I am not one of those who condemned her. I must be one of the nice, non-judgemental, non-condemning people. And of course there is anger. Perhaps the most instant and automatic of all the judgemental responses is the “how dare you” one (usually followed by name calling), when someone does something that I don’t like. Anger also has a sneakier cousin called resentment, which is even more automatic and often much harder to see.

The prophet Jeremiah summed it up perfectly for me in last week’s Old Testament reading when he said:

“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings. (17:9-10)

Yep. That’s me. I need a judge who knows me far better than I could ever know myself because my own inner judging voice is too bound up with the problem to be truly objective, even when I’m trying to be.

Perhaps the best hope we have of getting accurate feedback on who we really are, “to see the fruit of our doings” as Jeremiah put it is in how we treat other people. All of Jesus’ teachings today are phrased in pairs each of which has an element of mirroring in them. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged”, and so on. Our behaviour towards other people is the mirror that shows us what we really are.

Perhaps the perfect summary of everything we have been thinking about today comes in verse 38 where Jesus says: “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

The measuring stick we use for ‘out there’ is inevitably our internal one as well. We do tend get things back, often much later, and in a transformed way. ‘Pressed down, shaken together and running over into your laps’ is, if you work your way through it, a very powerful and rather odd metaphor.

If our measuring sticks for the world and people are small and narrow, then we will simply be incapable of seeing ourselves fully. Much of the spiritual life in practice is, surely, learning how to expand our measuring sticks, and finally to exchange the measuring sticks of the world, for bigger and better ones. And this is not just something we do with our rational minds, whose whole reason for being is to judge better. We have to come to know and engage our hearts.

One way to expand my measuring sticks is by becoming more interested in noticing my instinctive reactions and feelings and what caused them and doing something about them, than in passing judgement on other people.

It pays to cultivate the mindset of a student (which is one of the meanings of ‘disciple’) who tend to learn the most. A really useful starting point is the idea that I have lots of blockers and problems. And to uncover these I need help. And the people who do that best are those friends who will point them out to me. Or maybe even better my enemies, because, although I won’t like it, my reactions to them will reveal me to myself in very concrete ways unfiltered by any effort to protect my feelings. For example, when I get angry with someone then (whatever the cause or the technical rights and wrongs), my anger is my problem, because I am the one who is getting upset, and I need to understand how it works in me. Just try forgiving a serious wrong, or really turning the other cheek and you will see what I mean about getting upset, and the need to find out why. So later today during the intercessions we will be saying a litany on behalf of our enemies.

And, as Joseph saw when forgiving those brothers of his who had sold him into slavery, when doing all of this it helps to see things within bigger picture. Of particular use is the idea that God does know us fully, and is our strange judge. A judge who is utterly truthful and will not let us hide anything, but also happens to be our advocate and redeemer and merciful lover all at the same time. A judge who wants us to live life fully and abundantly.

Getting some glimpse into the utterly strange nature of God is perhaps the ultimate way to transform our measuring sticks. One of the insights the Transfiguration story gives us is that feeling that the apostles up there on Mt Tabor, for a brief, literally shining, moment suddenly and mysteriously were given a deep insight into the deathless state. And, not surprisingly, they came back down the mountain changed forever. Peter and John and James were so shaken by it that they then kept silent—which is perhaps a very wise response to epiphany experiences—to acknowledge the experience in our hearts, but not to ask too many judging (and limiting) questions, at least until much later.

Once the deathless has been seen or known in the heart, it seems that the measuring sticks of the mortal world do change. As St Paul (2 Cor 3:18) put it: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

As Elijah and Moses appear, the greatest prophets from the past, appear shining with the reflected, uncreated light of Christ, our normal ideas of time, and of life and death, are challenged by this blurring of normal boundaries. It makes us realise that the way we pass judgement on the meaning of our own lives in the here and now look pretty narrow and caught up in the outward appearance of things. Like Moses and Elijah, we do not know where we have come from and where we are going to, or what we truly signify in the larger pattern of things. That is not ours to judge.

So to my mind this exploration of measuring and judging does show us one of the pathways up Mt Tabor. It can lead us to a place of Transfiguration, to a place where we may be granted a glimpse through the veil that our disturbed hearts cast over the outward appearances of things and allow us to judge with right judgement.

Let me end with a little story which points towards many of today’s themes:

One dark night, a candle and a kerosene lantern were sitting out together. The candle said to the kerosene lamp “ah, my brother, show me how to shine like you”. The kerosene lamp said “how dare you call me your brother, I am clearly superior to you in every way that matters”. At that very moment, a full moon rose above the horizon, and lit up the whole land. The candle, looking at the reflection of the moon flickering in the ripples of a now-revealed lake, paused a moment. Then he said “ah, my brother.”

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**A prayer of Nikolai Velimirovic**, a Serbian Bishop who spoke out against Nazism until he was arrested and taken to Dachau. A man who understood enemies.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Enemies have driven me into Your embrace more than friends have. Friends have bound me to earth; enemies have loosed me from earth and have demolished all lily aspirations in the world.

Enemies have made me a stranger in worldly realms and an extraneous inhabitant of the world. Just as a hunted animal finds safer shelter than an un hunted animal does, so have I, persecuted by enemies found safest sanctuary, having ensconced myself beneath Your tabernacle, where neither friends nor enemies can slay my soul. Bless my enemies, O Lord.

They rather than I, have confessed my sins before the world.

They have punished me, when I have hesitated to punish myself

They have tormented me, whenever I have tried to flee torments.

They have scolded me, whenever I have flattered myself.

They have spat on me, whenever I have filled myself with arrogance.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. **Even I bless them and do not curse them.**

Whenever I have made myself wise, they have called me foolish.

Whenever I have made myself mighty, they have mocked me as though I were a dwarf

Whenever I have wanted to lead people, they have shoved me into the background.

Whenever I have rushed to enrich myself they have prevented me with an iron hand.

Whenever I thought I would sleep peacefully, they have wakened me from sleep.

Whenever I have tried to build a home for a long and tranquil life, they have demolished and driven me out.

Truly, enemies have cut me loose from the world and have stretched out my hands to the hem of your garment.

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

Bless them and multiply them and make them more bitterly against me: —so that my fleeing to you may have no return,

—so that all hope in men may be scattered like cobwebs., so that absolute serenity may begin to reign in my soul

—so that my heart may become the grave of my two evil twins arrogance and anger, so that I might amass all my treasure in heaven

—ah, so that I may for once be freed from self deception, which has entangled me in the dreadful web of the illusory life.

Enemies have taught me to know what hardly anyone knows, that a person has no enemies in the world except himself. One hates his enemies only when he fails to realise that they are not enemies. but cruel friends. It is truly difficult for me to say who has done me more evil in the world friends or enemies. Therefore bless, O Lord, both my friends and my enemies.

[A slave curses enemies, for he does not understand. But a son blesses them, for he understands. For a son knows that his enemies cannot touch his life, Therefore he freely, steps among them and prays to God for them.]

Bless my enemies, O Lord. Even I bless them and do not curse them.

—quoted in *The Illumined Heart* by Frederica Matthewes Green.