

Sunday Between 21st and 27th August [21]

Matthew 16:13-20

We are told we should never judge a book by its cover, and that is sound advice. It is very easy to take a partial knowledge of a person or situation and form an unfair judgement of what we see, or think we see. Book covers, incidentally, are designed precisely to make us judge them, in order to decide if they are something we wish to pick up and read. But just like the metaphor, we can be misled by the cover and miss out on a book we would otherwise have enjoyed based on our judgement of the outer art work. To avoid this, some bookshops offer a 'blind date with a book', where they wrap in packaging paper a book and write a few lines about the type of book within, to avoid the eye avoiding a cover if the picture does not inspire.

Jesus was, in many ways, the book one was unable to judge by the cover. His story was of the word of God incarnate, the king, the Messiah, the chosen one, and yet he lived the simplest of lives. Jesus was without possessions, land, stability and comforts for his entire ministry. He dressed simply, drew no particular attention to himself by virtue of his family connections and lived entirely by the generosity of others. A bit like the old fairy tale of the prince and the pauper where a rich young prince lives with the common people in disguise in order to find someone who can love him for who he is, Jesus came in humanity to find those who love God because of God's love for them, rather than through fear of breaking the rules of the almighty.

But it was impossible for Jesus to completely hide himself from those who knew him best. Of course he first attracted followers by his preaching, his miracles and perhaps his reputation, but for those who got close to him in his ministry, particularly the twelve, Jesus was clearly someone different, properly special compared to everyone else they had known. Even so, the leap that Simon made in today's gospel to call Jesus, Messiah, Son of the Living God, seems to have taken even Jesus by surprise.

Many people had been wondering who Jesus was, because he had done enough to prove he was no ordinary man, not even an ordinary holy man. But to jump from special man to son of God is quite a jump! This assertion by Simon moved Jesus to respond with his utter confidence in this disciple. He is renamed Peter, the rock, and promised the keys to the kingdom of heaven. So impressed at Peter's insight is Jesus, that he is elevated to a position of leadership amongst the disciples.

Yet Peter, of all the disciples, has the reputation for being the most impulsive, often being rebuked by Jesus for his quick and less than helpful responses to people and circumstances. Jesus predicted correctly that Peter would even deny knowing Jesus after the crucifixion and yet he made this promise, on this rock I will build my church.

It seems that not only was Jesus a book which shouldn't be judged by its cover, Jesus was also someone unable to be fooled by the cover of another's book. In all of Peter's foolishness and errors of judgement, his faith in Jesus shone through as the sure foundation of his words and actions. Peter's faith alone was what was needed for his relationship with Jesus to deepen that day.

Peter is often hailed as the disciple with whom many people can relate, not least because we know more about him than some of the others. But who isn't able to recall a time when we have said or done things in haste for all the best intentions and

with enthusiasm which later prove to have been a bit silly? Sometimes others recognise our intent and enthusiasm and forgive us the error, at other times we live with consequences of such action. However, we are encouraged by the example of Peter and the response of Jesus which suggests Jesus will always see our enthusiasm and intent even in the midst of our shortcomings and mistakes.

So today's lesson is one of seeing something that is not always obvious at first glance. We look back with the benefit of the church's teaching as wonder how anyone didn't see that Jesus was the messiah, but as we are told, he really didn't want that message to be shared during his earthly ministry. We recognise that Peter came good in the end because we have read the whole book. So how will we put today's lesson into practice in our own lives?

We can begin by reminding ourselves that Jesus does not judge us on our mistakes and errors, but rather he responds to our faith. Peter was just like we often are, hasty, thoughtless, unaware of all the facts before speaking, and yet he became the rock upon which the church was built. We can also be like Peter when we encounter others, looking not at what the world sees in them, but looking at them for who they really are, looking for what God sees in them. Just as we are given the grace by God to move on from our mistakes, we can show that same grace and generosity to others. Just as we know people see us framed by their own history and prejudices, so we must recognise that we do the same and actively try to avoid that. It is truly sad when we miss out on a good read because we judged a book by its cover, likewise, we must allow ourselves to enjoy the people God puts into our lives even those who are not like us. We have so much to learn and share and in each of us God recognises our true worth, may we open our eyes to see what Christ sees in the people we meet, day by day.