Sermon 29:08:21 Pr17 SL

Some years ago I was asked to preach at the marriage of two parishioners in Armagh RC catholic cathedral. They flew me to Belfast and I drove down to Armagh, parking outside the sacristy of this cathedral that looked for all the world like a Walt Disney fantasy. A welcoming nun showed me into the sacristy, where the Vicar General, uncle of the bride, was already vesting. ‘Good Morning, Father’, I said. He looked me up and down as I put on an alb & Stole and said ‘Jesus and Mary, they told me to expect a ruddy protestant’. I looked in the mirror- never having thought of myself as a protestant, and wondered just what did he see. I saw an Anglican priest ready to roll for a wedding, his version, from his experience, his perspective in Northern Ireland, was that the world is divided into Catholics and protestants. And if you’re not one you must be the other and so shouldn’t be dressed like this. It was an eye opener for us both.

Looking in the mirror is key to today’s readings. In Deuteronomy, we hear Moses telling the people to hold up to the mirror of the commandments, their own lives, their thinking and actions. Compare and contrast, you almost hear him say. Does your living reflect these statutes, if not, neither you nor the commandments hold any moral stature in order to inspire others.

In the epistle of James, this same message is reinforced. ‘Be doers of the word and not just hearers’. Don’t just pay lip service, as if you look in the mirror and then as soon as you turn away, you forget what you look like.

And Jesus too, rails against hypocrisy as he quotes from Isaiah, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’. Integrity is what is required of us as we seek to walk in the way of Christ. And of course, we shall all fail. But knowing we shall fail, be prepared to get back up and try again.

For what all these readings are pointing towards is what theologians like to call immutability- changelessness. God never changes. Nothing- neither our prayers nor our actions can make God different, God cannot act uncharacteristically. God does not have to return to the drawing board each day to tinker with his design in order to change it, to accommodate unpredicted events, neither can we force his hand by shouty prayers.

Moses, James and Jesus are all trying to exhort their hearers- and us also- to ‘Mind the Gap’ between their intentions and their actions, their prayer and their living. They are trying to encourage us truly to know ourselves. Not like that superficial mirror image, not like that assumed image, not like that imagined image we all have of ourselves. No.

We are being encouraged here to take time to look a little deeper into the mirror, without the Walt Disney fantasy, to look more intentionally into our inner selves in order to achieve that integration between who we are and what we aspire to. This we do by reflecting on Jesus of Nazareth- his words, actions, lifestyle and seeking to make his essence our own. We are called to get to know ourselves through God’s eyes, through God’s values and character, not our own- nor that of others. Above all we need to work towards that state which we find in the heart of God, where being and doing are fully integrated. Are one.

Yes, it’s a big ask and it needs working at. Being here, with each other, receiving Christ into ourselves in this sacrament of communion- being at one with him- is a big part, but so too is the need to set aside some time regularly daily, to reflect. It’s wonderful to see people each morning, shortly after 8am, using the church Gardens- people sitting, doing yoga, reading, meandering with the dog, tai chi-ing. Taking a few minutes to be still. But growing into integrity is hard work. Reading the scriptures is part of that too- setting a moment of the day to reflect on a bible verse or story, what does it teach us, where do I fit in, imagining myself as one of the characters, how does it impact upon me. Ensuring that our actions and our faith are one, is not a mere checking of our make up in the mirror, but it is for us Christians, a daily inspection, an examining of who do we think we are, for if we truly know ourselves to be the children of God, then our actions as well as our being need to reflect it.

And the final joke in the August series this year.

‘What did the clock say to the mirror. It’s time for reflection’.

It is indeed.