

As a young man I think I rather enjoyed looking at myself in a mirror. I suppose vanity played a part in it, but also I wanted to ensure that I looked alright for public scrutiny. I also wanted to impress the right person. I have to say that over the years the enjoyment has waned even to the point when the mirror has become something of an enemy. As St James says in the NT reading this morning, I look into the mirror and then go away and try to forget what I have seen.

Actually, St James sees the mirror in a far more positive light. His epistle is not like the other NT epistles – the great reformer Martin Luther criticised it because it didn't seem to preach the gospel of just-ification by faith. He called it the epistle of straw. But what this epistle does do is to point us beyond mere good behaviour or morality to the liberating message of the mercy of God and this is very important. It is important because it makes us realise that the Christian life is not simply

to see ourselves as we are – you know, our faults and weaknesses and so to concentrate on overcoming them so that we could, as it were, save our own souls. When I was young that sort of activity was encouraged by those small catholic manuals of devotion which confronted the user with a long, long list of sins for the purpose of self-examination. They always left me with a sense of abject failure and with a score of two out of a hundred. Such methods do not make good Christians - at best they could create self-righteous Pharisees. The Christian way is always to look beyond ourselves to the grace and mercy of God in Christ. We should see the Gospel as a mirror which reflects not only our own unworthiness but also the glory and love of Almighty God. There is a good illustration of this in a novel by Charlotte Bronte called 'Villette'. The heroine Lucy Snow who was a rather insignificant-looking girl tells how one evening she and her two friends were walking along a wide

corridor in a concert hall when, on turning a corner, she saw a group of three persons approaching to meet them. Then, after a moment, she realised that she was looking into a large mirror and it was herself and her two friends she was seeing. She says it gave her an unpleasant surprise – it wasn't very flattering. She hadn't realised she looked quite like that though, as she said, 'it might have been worse'. For that one moment she saw herself as others saw her. Now this is what St James takes as a parable. If this is true in the natural world then it is also true in the spiritual world. There also we need a mirror that will help us to see ourselves as we are. You could call it a moral or spiritual mirror and I believe we can find such a mirror in many forms. It could be in literature – in novels or plays. Shakespeare says that the purpose of a stage play is to 'hold the mirror up to nature'. Many novels, especially some of the great Victorian novels such as Dickens and Thackeray which hold up the mirror to society and to human nature can provide

this. They may not always be pleasant reading but they can be very salutary reading. It is, of course, especially true of the Bible. That can hold up the mirror to consciences. There is a great example of this in the OT. You may remember the story of King David and the prophet Nathan. David saw the beautiful woman Bathsheba and he desired her. The problem was that she was married – to Uriah. I won't go into details but the outcome was that David contrived to get Uriah killed in battle so that he could have Bathsheba even though David had many wives already. Nathan the prophet supplied the mirror David needed in the form of a story. He told David the story of a rich man who had many flocks. His poor neighbour owned just one small ewe lamb which he adored as a pet. When the rich man wanted to provide a meal for his visitors he stole his neighbour's one ewe lamb and killed it for that purpose rather than one of his own. When David heard of this he was furious and exclaimed

‘That man must be put to death’. Nathan replied ‘You are the man’. It was the mirror David needed.

We who aspire to be called Christians need that sort of mirror. We certainly find it in the Gospels. When you read about how the different kinds of people reacted to Jesus such as the Pharisees and the priests and the crowd – how their reaction to him sent him ultimately to the cross we so easily pass judgement on these people – but we should allow their stories to pass judgement on us because their faults and failings are our own. We need that mirror – the Word of God.

It’s a tough process. We are prone, as St James puts it, to look, and then look away, to forget and carry on just as before. It is interesting to read that Charles Dickens put into his books many ridiculous and unattractive characters drawn from real life. Sometimes they seemed a little overdrawn. Dickens records that often people would go to him and tell him that such and such a character in his

latest novel was not in the least true to life – that it was quite impossible that such an absurd character could ever have existed. Dickens said that it was usually a person of that very type that made the complaint. They didn’t recognise themselves in the mirror...

We can all of us read the Bible in that blind way and apply its judgements to other people and not to ourselves. We hear in today’s gospel reading our Lord’s denunciation of the Pharisees for their religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness but never feel convicted of these failings in ourselves. What about that rich young man who couldn’t make that sacrifice in order to follow Jesus. We call it the ‘great refusal’ but hardly think of ourselves being challenged in the same way. We accuse Peter of moral cowardice when he denied Jesus three times– but how would we fare given those same circumstances?

I can't help but think that God has much to say to our consciences and our reading of the Bible day by day or week by week ought to be helping us to hear it. There is always the danger that we let God judge our enemies and not ourselves. When we look around our world today and see such terrible things – oppression and cruelty, racial prejudice, abuse of persons both young and old, who is free of blame in all this? **If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like the man who sees his face in the mirror and then goes off and forgets what manner of man he was.** So says St James. I wonder how many of those who have brought such disgrace on the Church of God and damaged so many lives have looked into the Gospel mirror, seen their image, and then walked away and clouded their memory.

But then James says **But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he**

**has heard but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.** Here I am sure he is speaking of the Gospel as opposed to the old Jewish law. The Gospel, he is saying, has a liberating effect because it leads on beyond judgement to mercy, repentance and forgiveness. The Christian way, as I said earlier, is always to look beyond our own unworthiness to the grace and mercy of God in Christ. The Gospel is indeed a mirror which reflects not only ourselves as we are but also the glory and love of God. It is just what St Paul himself says about the mirror – **Beholding as if in a mirror the glory of God, we become changed into that same image. That is the Gospel that sets us free.**