

Self-awareness

Joel 2:27-32; Luke 18:9-14

“Magic mirror on the wall, Who is the fairest one of all?”

It's one of the most chilling scenes in the cartoon film, Snow White, where the Wicked Queen summons the Slave in the Magic Mirror and demands, for the umpteenth time, who is the most beautiful person in the kingdom. Amongst many other things, it is an interesting psychological analysis of this woman's neurosis and narcissism. How aware, honestly aware, of herself is she?

Each morning, as you begin with your daily ablutions, what and who do you see looking back at you from your mirror? Do you admire the years of wisdom, the winning smile, the eyes of experience and understanding? Or are you horrified by the ravages of time, the wrinkles and receding hairline, the realignment of your body now more built for comfort than for speed, and all the rest?

We might not have magic mirrors telling us how beautiful, or otherwise, we are, but used honestly, those ordinary mirrors tell us something about who and what we have now become. Self-awareness is a rare gift. The ability to look at ourselves honestly: the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual person we are, matters.

There's another fictional mirror that I came to my mind, the one in the Harry Potter films. The magical Mirror of Erised (Erised is Desire spelled backwards) shows the most desperate desires of a person's heart, how they want to be seen, what they want to achieve in life; the realistic and unrealistic is revealed. The happiest and most satisfied person in the world would look into the mirror and see a reflection of themselves, exactly as they were, for they would then have no one and nothing more to yearn or desire for than the mirror could ever show them. But of course, it is intrinsically inherent of human nature to desire something greater than one's own self. We tend to see a distorted image of ourselves – either better than we actually are, or worse than we really are.

“Parables are like fishing flies: they are full of attractive features – feathers, bright colours – and they end with a sharp little barb! The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is just such a parable. On the surface, it is a straightforward and bracing story about the dangers of spiritual pride and the benefits of confession.”ⁱ In reality it delves deeper. It’s part of the ‘great reversal’ technique that Luke uses in his gospel. The mighty shall be humbled, and the humble shall be lifted up. It’s a parable that challenges us to look at ourselves honestly, fearlessly, critically, but I would plead, hopefully too.

Pharisees and tax collectors have become biblical caricatures to us. The self-righteous, rule-bound religious leader, lacking in compassion and insight, is contrasted with the repentant, meek, simple, and humble tax collector. But be careful, not all Pharisees were bad (many in Jesus’ day were liberal interpreters of Jewish law and Jesus enjoyed hospitality with them). Whereas tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers, apart from Zacchaeus, who showed remarkable self-awareness when Jesus came to visit him in Jericho.

It is not that the Pharisee in this story is a bad man. He’s doing many wonderful things. He was grateful to God, and was generous with his money, and observed the routine of his religion. But...well...what? Did he look in the mirror of faith and see his undoubted qualities, but did he see the judgementalism he showed towards others who did not come up to the mark? Did he see that take on to himself God’s role, which wasn’t for him to do? Pride is perhaps the chief sin of the religious person: it confuses Creator and creation, Giver and Gift.ⁱⁱ The Pharisee may be a paragon of piety, but what he is not is a humble man before God.

The tax collector has issues too. His job was in reality to squeeze money from his neighbours, partly to pay Rome, partly to line his own pockets. They were often foreigners in Palestine, and they were roundly despised.ⁱⁱⁱ But he was honest before God. In paintings the Pharisee is usually in the full light, confidently happy in his prayer in the Temple. The tax collector is in the shadow, behind a pillar, head down. But crucially, still there. Despite everything he knew about himself, the tax collector was still able to come to God. He could do no other.

This parable speaks about the need for self-awareness in every aspect of our lives, especially our faith life. My suspicion is that there will be few who behave like the Pharisee, but there will be some. Learn from this story. You are doing wonderful things; God loves your prayerfulness and your coming to worship, and your Gift Aid declaration form. But, look at how you look at others. Those people who you believe do not measure up to standard – not God’s, but yours. Maybe ‘those people’ are not quite as faithful, not quite as committed to the Church, not quite as socially acceptable, not quite as on-message as you are yourself, but they are still children of God. Before you judge them, in fact, if you ever get around to judging them, look in that mirror of faith. Are you as attractive to God as God thinks you are? What does God see in you, and about you, that you have air-brushed out?

My suspicion is that there may be more who align themselves with the tax collector. Not feeling too worthy; not feeling at all confident; not even sure if they should be here in this shiny new sanctuary at all, and now we’ve moved the chairs about there are no pillars to hide behind! But God listens to your honest prayer, and sees the fact that despite everything you know about yourself, all the problems and flaws and inconsistencies, God really does love you, almost despite the fact that you are not sure you love yourself, when it comes to your faith. The tax collector’s prayer is the silent, wistful prayer we say to ourselves when no-one else is listening. “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” No-one listening, except God. No-one judging you at that point, not even God. Here is the prayer of the honest try-er; here is the prayer of the brave soul, the really brave soul, who has taken a long, hard look at themselves, and not liked what they saw looking back, and had just about enough courage and faith to sidle into church, and hope against hope that, despite everything, God might be there for them.

God is. God is there for them. For us. For you. For me.

You see, one of the things about the mirror of faith, when we look into it, is that not only do we see our own reflection, comfortable or uncomfortable though that might be. We also catch a little glimpse of God, that family likeness. Somewhere in the eyes, the tilt of the head, the corner of

the mouth. It might be a little fuzzy, but the image of God is in us, for we are God's children. And that is a good thing, to be aware of when we look at ourselves, and for ourselves.

Self-awareness, the ability to see ourselves as we really are, is both a comforting and a terrifying truth. Robert Burns in his poem, 'To a louse', on seeing a louse creeping along a lady's bonnet in church, wrote:

*"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us,
To see oursel's as others see us..."*

For Burns, the power was God; and the gift was the gift of self-awareness; which the Pharisee didn't have, and the tax collector did.

Self-awareness is not just for individuals. It is for nations. If the United Kingdom, and Scotland within it, had the gift of self-awareness, what would we see looking back at us from the mirror of honesty? Not all bad, but if our country looked at itself it would wonder, I believe, 'Is this what we have become as a nation?' The gift of self-awareness is for our world too. If the world was to look at itself in that mirror of honesty, would it truly see the inequalities and injustices, the beyond serious ecological cliff-edge we stand on, the unspeakable evil of human trafficking, a world-wide crime, that has left thirtynine people dead in a refrigerated trailer, and for what? The gift of self-awareness is for the Church too. What would we see looking back at us in the mirror of honesty that God holds up for our benefit? Much that is not fully right, much that has to be further developed, changed, transformed, but also much for which we should be thankful, and encouraging signs that though we are not perfect, we do bring something to the table of life that makes in big and in small ways our community, our nation, and our world a better place.

We read this little parable of Jesus, and we are handed a mirror of honesty. We read this little parable of Jesus, and we are asked, how self-aware are we? We read this little parable of Jesus, and look at Jesus looking at us, and wondering how we, with our faith, relate to God, and relate to the people around us, by putting what we believe into life-changing action.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Marjorie Proctor-Smith, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4, p213

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV/1, pps 358-513

ⁱⁱⁱ E Elizabeth Johnson, Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4, pps 215-217