

HOMEGROUP QUESTIONS: SUNDAY 17 SEPTEMBER 2023

Lectionary Readings: Romans 14:1-12 and Matthew 18:21-35

1. We live in a society where people's work is regularly assessed. What are the good and bad things about that? Is assessment different from the Biblical concept of 'judgment'?
2. Do you feel you judge yourself too harshly? Or do you feel you are sometimes inclined to turn a blind eye to your faults?
3. How easy is it to make a wrong judgement on a person? What evidence do we tend to use in making such judgements?
4. Are there sections of society who are more likely to be judged as bad? Why is that?
5. Read the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14) Why do you think Jesus was so keen to condemn judgements that resulted from spiritual pride?
6. Read the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18: 21-35). What does this have to say to us about what our basic approach to other people should be?
7. In Romans Paul says we should not expect everyone to respond to God in the same way and that we should not quarrel over disputable matters. What issues do you think it is reasonable to differ on? Are there some issues that you think everyone has to believe if they are to bear the name 'Christian'? Are there some standards of behaviour that you think everyone has to seek to obey if they are following Christ?
8. Paul says that we should not treat a brother or sister with contempt. Is he applying that to fellow Christians or to people generally?
9. What example did Jesus set in the way he approached people, whether they were judged good or bad?
10. Do you agree that joy not judgement is at the heart of the gospel message?
11. What account of yourself might you give when standing before God's judgement seat?

G.M.B

Text of sermon for those not present:

A few years ago I came across an assessment chart which had been jokingly created to judge a person's performance level:

Performance level	Far exceeds requirements	Exceeds requirements	Meets requirements	Needs improvement	Fails minimum requirement
Quality of work	Leaps tall buildings with a single bound	Leaps tall buildings with a running start	Can leap tall buildings if prodded	Bumps into buildings	Cannot recognise buildings
Promptness	Faster than a speeding bullet	As fast as a speeding bullet	Can be trusted firing blanks	Misfires frequently	Wounds self when handling guns

Initiative	Is full of ideas	Has an idea	Recognises an idea	Forgets ideas	Does not know what an idea is
Adaptability	Walks on water	Keeps head above water	Washes with water	Drinks water	Passes water in an emergency
Communication	Talks with God	Talks with angels	Talks with self	Argues with self	Loses argument with self

Assessment of the work we do is an appropriate activity providing it's done for the right reasons and with the right criteria, but Jesus asked us to avoid judging people. And yet that's something most of us often do – and usually that judgement is often based on just outward appearances. I know some people have a low opinion of themselves and judge themselves too harshly but most of us have a tendency to be harsher on others. When the other person takes a long time to do something, he or she's slow, but, when I take a long time over something, it's because I'm being thorough. When the other person doesn't do something, he or she's 's lazy. When I don't do it, I'm busy. When the other person does something without being told, he or she's over-stepping the mark. When I go ahead and do something without being told, that's initiative. When the other person states his or her opinion strongly, he or she is being obstinate. When I state my opinion strongly, I'm firm. When the other person is lacking in courtesy, he or she's rude. When I am less courteous, I'm doing my own thing.

Jesus particularly disliked the 'I am holier than you' approach adopted by many religious people. He saw that those who pride themselves on being very religious and very faithful easily fall into the trap of judging others. They are very quick to notice faults in others and to denounce people as sinners, whilst being very slow to notice any of their own weaknesses. In rabbinic style he posed the question: 'How can you remove the speck from your brother's eyes when you have a plank in your own?' (Matt 7:3-5). Some of you will know the story of the old Scottish lady who lived alone except for her servant. She judged everyone as being too sinful to associate with. One day she said to her servant: 'When we get to heaven – unlike all the sinful people round here – there'll be a place prepared for us.' And then she paused and said, 'Well I know there'll be a place for me. When I think about it, I'm not so sure about you!'

Such an approach promotes contempt and aversion. It makes us not want to mix with certain people and it prevents us from properly recognising their inherent worth as children of God. They appear less beautiful, less bright, less rich, less successful, and, most damaging of all, less worthy: less worthy of our time and attention, less worthy of our efforts and love. We need to recall that Jesus spoke to those who were regarded as worthless by society: he touched the untouchables; he dined with the lowest members of society; he spoke with foreigners; he appointed women as well as men to be his disciples. And he set the disciples an example of the importance of service to all by acting as the servant not the master and washing their feet. All these actions offended the religiously proud and their response was to condemn him and have him arrested, tried, and crucified. They delighted in showing their contempt for this man whom they judged blasphemous and sinful because he did not follow all their religious rules. Rules that they felt were God-given. They closed their ears and minds to the fact Jesus was opening up a new understanding of God and of what God wanted.

On the radio I listened to a Muslim talking about religious extremism. He explained how he had grown up in a moderate Muslim family but how as a teenager he had been recruited by the radical Islamists. He began proclaiming that only those who obeyed all the rules as laid down by the Koran were enemies. The Islamic fundamentalist leaders told him to report anyone who being in any way disrespectful of Islam. He told them about one boy at his school and the leaders sent someone into the school to deal with him. To the boy's horror 'dealing with him' meant knifing him. The knifer then made his escape. As he watched his fellow schoolmate literally bleed to death, the young boy found

himself asking: 'How can this be what God wants? This cannot be what Islam is about!' He has since spent his life trying to discourage Muslims from listening to the extremists.

It made me wonder whether the apostle Paul, who was at first a persecutor of the Christians, might similarly have been affected by watching the stoning to death of the apostle Stephen. Did it make him question what Judaism was about and was it the first step on his road to Damascus when he experienced his vision of Christ. Paul learnt the hard way that religious people may not always get it right. They think they are doing what God wants but they get it wrong. In the passage from Romans he says that we should not expect everyone's faith to be like our own. I suspect Paul refers to the issues of how you behave on God's holy day and on what you can or cannot eat because he had been criticised for breaking the traditional religious rules on both those issues. But you could supply your own examples: people differ on the hymns they like to sing, on the type of prayer they use, on the format of worship. If we were questioned about what we believe we would also find we are not of one mind. Paul says all of us are servants of God and it is not the role of a servant to condemn another servant – all that matters is that we focus on what we should be doing – and that means having a heart-felt desire to serve God. 'Why do you judge your brother or sister?' he says.

Most people yearn for a positive and life-affirming approach, not condemnation. The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel produced the following prayer just prior to the start of the millennium:

I am weary of the dark voices crying doom;
I am weary of the fearful voices crying only for their nation;
I am weary of the disinherited voices crying in hopelessness;
Let my voice sing the laughter of God;
Let my voice sing good news to the poor;
Let my voice sing restitution of the oppressed;
Let my voice sing healing of the violated;
Let my voice sing the return of the banned;
Let my voice be the laughter of God.

Joy not judgement is at the heart of the gospel message. We are called not to judge others but to serve others with kindness. Over the centuries there have been many Christians who have recognised that. A good example is William Booth who founded the Salvation Army to tackle alcoholism and other social problems. His son later wrote of his father:

To each person he offered his love, his spirit of goodwill. In him this was a constant source of benevolence.... His love for his fellows seemed boundless. It was not to be put off by the extreme unloveliness of some of those before whom it was poured out, nor by ingratitude, nor their hardness of heart... He plunged into the underworld in quest of those whom others shunned or of whom they despaired.... [My father's] wide-embracing and fervent 'charity' no criticism could stay, no rebuffs diminish, no hatred quench.

When the great poet John Milton wrote his poem 'Paradise Lost' he chose to make obdurate pride the great vice of Satan. Satan's pride meant he was only concerned with his own status. He was unable to recognise his limitations, unable to consider that he might be wrong, unable to listen properly to God. The Christian gospel challenges us to reject pride in favour of humility. In the 1940s one of the most famous ministers in America was Peter Marshall and he was appointed Chaplain to the US Senate. However, he then had a heart attack. When he eventually returned to his work after having had to take a long time off, one of his friends asked him what he had learned during his

illness. He replied, 'I have learned that the Kingdom of God goes on without Peter Marshall'. It's far too easy to fill our heads with the idea that what we do is somehow particularly special and indispensable but in reality none of us can earn a place in Heaven. Places in heaven are entirely reliant on God's grace because none of us are perfect or indispensable even if we think we are.

The fact that we are all in need of forgiveness is at the heart of Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant – the servant who condemns others even though he has been himself forgiven for his actions. Jesus is saying: how can we expect God to forgive us our sins if we are not willing to forgive others and to show love to others?

Paul ends his passage by reminding people that each of us will have to give an account of ourselves to God on the judgement day. Knowing that, we should abandon religious pride in ourselves and focus instead on offering service to others, recognising that we are likely to receive as much as we give as we travel through life.

Let me end with a prayer written by Jane Austen, one of the world's greatest novelists:

Incline us, O God, to think humbly of ourselves, to be saved only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with the charity which we would desire from them ourselves; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.