

Comfortably Numb...?

MIRROR MIRROR.....

Someone gave me a present once that took me quite a while to figure out why!

Many of you will remember Bill McClellan. Bill's other name was Barnabas because Bill was an encourager. When I was first preaching in this church he would write me letters – which would always arrive on Wednesday! Bill's encouragement to me is one of the main reasons I'm here today preaching this sermon! One day though, Bill gave me a very strange present – a mirror. He had a habit of doing slightly extraordinary things and this present, this mirror came without any explanation – just the mirror!

Of course, being clever, I finally figured out why he had given me a mirror! It was to remind me as I looked at myself, of who I am in Christ. I am a loved child of God; I am precious and special; I am a son of the King; I am seated in the heavenly realms with Christ; I am forgiven, restored, reconciled, and saved. That is all wonderfully true! And Bill, in all his wisdom gave me a mirror to encourage me to see myself as the child of God that I am.

He did that because he was perceptive enough to know that Ian Phillips would need lots of encouragement to see himself as God sees him. 'Cause left to his own devices Ian Phillips has a tendency to think of himself only as he thinks others see him – which most of the time is not quite as positive.

Bill wanted me to be reminded of some deep, deep truths, so I have put this mirror in a place I can avoid looking at it! Because truth is I find it quite uncomfortable to look at myself in this mirror, as many of you will – as I am about to prove. As I walk around I want you to look into the mirror and see the person God sees! His unique creation, loved, special, precious. Some of you would do pretty much anything to avoid looking in the mirror wouldn't you? Trouble is – you're the very people who need to do it lots! When Bill gave me this mirror and reminded me to look at myself the way God sees me, he hit on something

deep and significant, life changing and eternal. I'm still learning this one.... I have a way to go.... but I'm not where I was! Friends, there is a part of me that is all the things Bill wanted me to remember. Sometimes I am forgiving, kind, compassionate, generous, patient, tender, and gracious.... because I believe the good in me and I see myself as God sees me. Then I am capable of the best a person can be.

Recently though, particularly through this current sermon series, as we have looked at the powerful story of the prodigal son, I've begun to think there might have been another reason Bill gave me a mirror. Perhaps there were really important things that he was encouraging me to remember, but perhaps also there were some things that Bill was suggesting I never forget. You see, one thing about a mirror is that quite simply it doesn't lie. Mirrors are great, until you actually have to look into one aren't they? A mirror tells the truth doesn't it? The truth is that as we look into a mirror we look at a reflection staring back that is a mixture of both grace and dirt!

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! In all these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your order. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitution comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’” (Luke 15 v 25-30)

When we look in a mirror, shockingly, there is, if we are honest something of the older son looking back at us. Truth is we are all a mixture of grace – the goodness of God at work in and through us, and the dirt that lingers in the hearts and minds of ordinary people like you and me. Part of the power of this story, is that it is unfinished. We find ourselves asking questions about the older son:

- What is he going to do?
- Will he stand outside or join in?
- Will he come home?
- Can he come home?
- How can he return home when he is lost in his resentment?
- Will he respond to his father's generous plea or will he remain stuck in his bitterness?

The point of the story here is that it does not pitch one son against the other – it is not that one son is good and the other evil. But the contrast is powerful; one son allows himself to be held in a forgiving embrace; the other stands back, looks at his father's invitation of grace but cannot yet step over his anger and let his father heal him too.

Truth is we are all a mixture – there is immense good in all of us – but there is much dirt too. I am capable of great love, sacrifice, sensitivity and generosity, but I am also capable of wounding and hurting others, sometimes deeply, of betrayal and deliberate rejection. Daily in our heart we carry both purity and wickedness. Our awareness of the mixture of grace and dirt in us can be a shocking experience.

An Auschwitz survivor Yeheil Dinur was called to testify against Adolf Eichmann at his trial in 1961, when Dinur saw his oppressor in the courtroom, he fainted. He later said that his shock was caused by the realisation that the Eichmann before him at the trial was not the godlike army officer who sent millions to their death. This Eichmann he said, was an ordinary, unremarkable man, and if this Eichmann was so ordinary, then what he had done – any man could do – even Yeheil Dinur. He was capable of acting in exactly the same way.¹

Maybe as we look into the mirror and see the mixture of grace and dirt, we become aware that we are the ones who need to change. We can allow our hearts to become hard – or we can keep them soft. If we want to keep them soft, and not be the one standing outside, then we need to be ready to change. To

change our attitude or actions; to change our thought process; to change the way we look at situations and other people; to change the way we behave or respond to particular people or circumstances.

Perhaps the path to freedom is to make a change: the choice to forgive; the decision not to judge; the move toward another person; the softening of an attitude; the willingness to listen; the investment of time in a relationship.

Here are some words from a poem:

I'm gonna make a change for once in my life
It's gonna make a difference
Who am I being blind, pretending not to see
I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
If you wanna make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, then make the change!

Friends, as we look in the mirror what do we see? In truth, a mixture of grace and dirt. As you look now, at yourself, what do you know you need to change? Where are you standing outside? Today there's an opportunity for you to respond, now – there's an opportunity to think! As we listen to a song (the words of the 'poem' are the words of Michael Jackson's song "Man in the Mirror") we are going to listen to the song and invite the Holy Spirit to help us identify where we need to change. We're going to share communion together, and as we do that I encourage you to resolve in your heart what your response will be.

After communion we'll have a time of worship and a time for response. You might want to walk through the door for yourself or for others; you could come and put a pebble in the water as you choose to forgive; you could write God a letter with what is on your heart; you could light a candle as you resolve to be different in your home, marriage, workplace or another place or relationship that you find difficult. You could take the paper with the picture of a family on and write your prayer before God for the change you will make in yourself and in your family – and then place it at the foot of the cross. You could come and pray with

someone from the prayer ministry team. You could take a mirror to remind you of who you are in Christ and that you are so in need of his grace.

Friends, you are in complete control of the rest of the story. The invitation is to look in the mirror, make the change, come inside and know again the warm embrace of the father who loves you because he loves you because he loves you.....

1. Quoted in: Lucas, Geoff *"Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church,"* Zondervan 2008, Page 131

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