

1 Samuel 16: 1-13; Ephesians 5: 8-14.
4th Sunday in Lent.

24.03.17

Looking at the Heart

‘And the winner is...’. And then some bejewelled film star opens the envelope, pauses for dramatic effect and announces... the winner! And the camera pans to some familiar face who gasps and feigns surprise, and receiving the gold statue up on the stage proceeds to thank every single person they’ve ever known, including God. And they are roundly applauded by everyone, even those who are grinning through gritted teeth because they’re gutted that they didn’t get the coveted gold statue.

Yes, it’s just a few weeks since the Oscars and that embarrassing debacle over the award for the best film, and it was the Oscars that came to mind when I was thinking about this verse from our reading from 1 Samuel: ‘for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’ After all, I guess the Oscars ceremony is kind of iconic for our celebrity obsessed society, one in which we are preoccupied with externals: looks and wardrobe and style and where people are judged by their youthful appearance and beauty and fitness. That’s the world we live in. But God looks at the heart.

It was a lesson that Samuel had to learn in our reading this morning. There he was, commissioned by God to anoint the next king of Israel in place of the hapless Saul, and he finds himself surveying the sons of Jesse. And we read that, ‘when they came, and Samuel saw Eliab, he thought, ‘Surely the Lord’ s anointed is now before the Lord’, and we might wonder what it was about Eliab that led Samuel to that conclusion. Something about his appearance. Something about the externals. Something about surface impressions that appealed. But God judges differently. And indeed thank God that God judges differently. Thank God that God is not taken in by superficial factors but sees into the heart. Because here lies, surely, the subversive, cutting edge of our faith. Here lies the reason why our faith is one that can champion the cause of the marginalised and the excluded and who do not outwardly cut it in the eyes of the world. Here lies the reason why Jesus could scandalise the

pious by eating with those labelled as sinners. Here lies the reason why Christians have stood up to those who would flaunt their power and their might and their position. Why? Because God is utterly unimpressed by appearances, by outward show, by what lies on the surface. God sees into the heart.

And that is good news. Or at last it is supposed to be. But I wonder – is it? We're supposed to be grateful that God sees into the heart, but should we be? You see my problem is, when God looks into the heart, what does God see? When God looks into *my* heart, what does God see? If the implication is that God is looking for purity and integrity and moral strength then maybe it would be better for God not to look too closely. You see, surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, the Bible can be pretty downbeat about the human heart. Right back in the Book of Genesis it doesn't take God long to conclude, after we have violated and spoiled God's beautiful world, that 'the wickedness of human beings was great in the earth, and that every imagination of their hearts was only evil continually.' And then there's a flattering little verse in the book of Jeremiah chapter 17 which tells us that 'the heart is deceitful above any other thing, desperately sick.' So much for the human heart. And so God looks into David's heart, but what does God see there? Well, given the emphasis on the heart I'm not sure why we're told in verse 12 that David was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. But we do know that those beautiful eyes were later to feast upon the alluring body of another man's wife; and we do know that his handsome and ruddy features were later to belong not only to an adulterer but also a murderer. So what did God actually see when God looked into David's heart? Was it all sweetness and light? Evidently not.

This week I've been thinking about Martin McGuinness, who died last Tuesday. McGuinness was Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and a former leader of the Provisional Irish republican Army, reputedly second-in-command of the IRA in Derry on the notorious Bloody Sunday, when 14 civil rights protesters were shot dead by British soldiers. And McGuinness, of course, was a deeply controversial figure. To some he was a vicious terrorist with much blood on his hands, worthy of the hot corner in hell that the English politician Norman Tebbit was quoted as hoping for him on the day of his death. And Tebbit had his

reasons for such sentiments. For others, though, McGuinness was a freedom-fighter against injustice and oppression. But either way his later significant role in brokering the Good Friday agreement and in the peace process in Northern Ireland has led to McGuinness being described as having had a change of heart, a conversion from war to peace, from violence to reconciliation. I think that may be over-simplistic but I do wonder what we might have seen if we could have looked into the heart of Martin McGuinness. I suspect that we would see neither a total hero nor a total villain. I suspect that we would see the usual tangle of mixed motives, the usual blend of virtue and vice – a heart showing evidence both of sin and also of being sinned against. And isn't that true of all of us? Aren't we all a complex mixture? As a beautiful song by the American singer Mary Chapin Carpenter puts it, we're 'Neither light nor darkness... neither night nor day... neither kind nor heartless... neither lost nor saved...' We are this bewildering mixture.

And furthermore, whatever lurks there, good and bad, we can never see fully into the heart of a human being anyway: it always remains inscrutable and mysterious. Only God really sees. Indeed that is the problem with judging anyone. We can never know the full story of any person's life, never know where they have hurt and been hurt, never know the currents, the eddies, the influences that have worn away and moulded and shaped a person. Every human heart is dark and impenetrable – even our own. And the same, surely, would be true of the heart of the man who caused such death and injury in London last Tuesday, Khalid Massod. We talk of people like him being 'radicalised', changed, and we search for causes, for reasons, and there are all those interviews with people who knew Massod at school, people who were his neighbours, who worked with him because we have to try to make some sort of sense of the actions of a murderer. But in the end we never really know for the heart is unknown territory. We see what is on the outside but we can never fathom fully what is within. Only God can do that.

All this brings to mind a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As some of you may know Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the last war who resisted the Nazis and who was imprisoned and later executed in the last days of the war. And as he languished in solitary confinement he was struck by the contrast between how others saw of

him and how he saw himself: between his outward appearance and his inner turmoil. Evidently on the outside, to other prisoners, he appeared calm and brave. But to himself, inside he felt fearful and distraught. And he wonders, which is really him? The poem is called 'Who am I? He writes,

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from a country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.

But then he goes on, contrasting what he appears to others with what he knows of himself inside:

Am I really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat,
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting
for words of kindness, for neighbourliness....
Weary and empty at praying...
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

There's the tension – how he appears to others and what he knows of himself, inside. And he concludes in some desperation by asking which is really him.

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

But then come the final reassuring lines:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

There's the gospel! 'Who am I?' 'Which is the real me?' Well, whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine'. I am yours! My heart lies open to you as it rests in your hands. Whatever I am, whatever perplexing mixture of virtue and shame, God only knows, but whatever I am, thank God I am thine.

So back to David. Who knows exactly what God saw when God peered into David's heart? Who knows what mixture of light and shadow shifted there? But the important thing is that whatever darkness God saw and whatever darkness was later manifested in his life was an opportunity for God, because David was God's. And so God could take him – good and bad – and redeem him. And David therefore goes down in history as the great king despite his sins, because the darkness is an occasion for God's grace and redemption to be displayed.

Likewise with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Whether he was deep down, in his heart, the man others saw – brave, and calm and firm - or whether he was the contemptibly woebegone weakling that he saw in himself, or whether he was a mixture of both, he was God's. And by the grace of God Bonhoeffer is remembered as one of the great martyrs of the Christian church in the last century.

So for you and me. Traditionally this season of Lent in the Christian church has been a time of self-examination, a time to look inwards. Insofar as we can see into our own hearts, God knows what we may find. God alone knows what lurks there. But whoever I am, thou knowest, I am thine. And any and every darkness is always an opportunity for the light of God's grace. It's always an opportunity for the redemptive power of God to be displayed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

O blessed and holy God,
The light of another day dispels the darkness of night
And your power is displayed around us.

And creation wakes to the pulse an surge of life
And your power is displayed around us.

And creation proclaims your handiwork in all its glory and splendour
With the colours and sounds of Spring's coming,
And your power is displayed around us.

And so we praise and worship you.
We come before you with song and with our hearts open to you,
And we find you here, meeting us in bread and wine.
And your power is displayed around us.

But God we come to you with hearts full of the wrong things.
We come to you and we would rather hide our hearts from you.
And so we confess our sins to you, saying...

O God, shine the light of your forgiving love deep into our hearts and so
may your power, you healing, saving power be displayed in us.
For we pray...

