

Sermon “God Looks upon the Inner Man”

1 Samuel 16; Luke 5:27-32

It is a great privilege to stand here again in the pulpit of this wonderful church of St. Mary the Virgin in Calne and preach to you at the Annual Church Service for the Freemasons in Wiltshire, and it is especially lovely to see so many of you here this afternoon and in such fine voice.

In preparing this service and sermon I was reminded of how easily it is for us, just through human nature, to have preconceived ideas about people before really knowing them and this is certainly true in the context of Freemasonry where people outside of our organisation have become very suspicious of our Order and, thereby, its members and have often judged us through lack of any real knowledge and understanding. Our previous more secretive nature has had a lot to do with this too, no doubt. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that the ordinary human being is often very wary of the unknown and unusual and of people who do not fit into their own group or experiences. It is sad to think of this when Freemasonry strives to become as inclusive as it can be and work with people and organisations outside of the Order which have similar moral codes and conduct.

Our first reading this afternoon will be very familiar indeed to senior members of the Royal Arch being one of the many scriptural passages which are read out during one of our ceremonies. It is used specifically to remind the candidate that the omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient God looks not at the outward appearance of a person but what is truly on their heart; a message which isn't reserved just for those seeking power and authority, whether it be ruler of Israel or ruler of a Royal Arch Chapter, but is something which we should all take on board – reflecting on our own motives and actions which should always mirror the will of God's (the True and Living God Most High) for us and for others.

Those two great Old Testament prophets, Samuel, and Elijah before him, sought out to anoint a king for Israel and on both occasions were surprised by the choice God had made. Likewise, I have often heard of Freemasons being upset, not so much in this Province I hastened to add, when somebody else has received a promotion or appointment over themselves. It upsets me especially where our order promotes or appoints, hopefully, on merit. We should accept such decisions and accept that there will be very good reasons for that appointment or promotion. As we know, in the Old Testament Joseph's brothers and David's brothers found it hard to understand why their younger sibling had been chosen over them – but God had a purpose and chose them because they could bring that purpose to fruition although it might have seemed an odd choice at the time.

Therefore it is importance to be prepared to embrace the unusual – to understand that nothing at all limits God's power to be everywhere - omnipresent, all powerful – omnipotent and all knowing – omniscient at the same time. We can too often be tempted to put God in a box, in the same way as we often do with people, or try to hide away from Him.

As the psalmist put it ([Psalm 139](#)) –

“O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;

you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;

it is so high that I cannot attain it.

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb."*

Recently I heard a story which I had been told before many years ago. It might be apocryphal but it is still a good one. A church was waiting for a new pastor or rector; somebody to lead it following the departure of the previous incumbent. Only a few people (the selection committee) had met the successful candidate before.

Just before the service began a dirty dishevelled tramp arrived at the church and sat himself at the back of the building all on his own. Not one person welcomed him or would sit near him. He was, in fact, totally shunned by the congregation such that he felt unable to come up and receive Holy Communion.

At the end of the service the acting officiant stood up and announced to the congregation that the following week the new rector would be attending the church for the first time and he hoped for a full church to warmly welcome him and to show the depth of their love and support for him. At the end of this short notice the tramp at the back stood up and walked slowly and purposefully up to the front of the church to stand next to the officiant and calmly announce to the congregation that he was indeed the new rector who had come a week early to quietly observe his new congregation and from what he had just witnessed there was much work needed to be done if it was to be the welcoming and loving church the acting officiant had suggested it was.

Our second reading this afternoon gives us a great scriptural example of this unexpected welcoming.

Once again the Disciples of Christ, together with many others, witnessed the unexpected and pre-conceptions were blown away. Jesus sought out the lowest of the low in Jewish life – a tax collector. Under Roman jurisdiction, the Romans recruited people of their conquered lands to collaborate with them – especially over the collection of taxes for Roman use. The incentive was that the local tax collectors could cream off some of the money collected for themselves. Thus they were considered thieves, collaborators and much worse. They were hated, detested by the ordinary Jewish people. In common parlance they were sinners.

The Message, a modern paraphrase of the Bible by *Eugene H. Petersen* puts the story in really graphic easy language. It describes Jesus eating supper with "*disreputable characters*" and the Pharisees saying to the *disciples* "*What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cosy with crooks and riffraff!*"

Jesus's answer is one of the classic pieces of scripture which we would all do well to remember – "*Who needs a doctor, the healthy or the sick?*"

The story is also told of a new vicar who placed a large poster at the front of his new church in an affluent part of a large city announcing that "*All Sinners Welcome*". The Parochial Church Council appealed to his bishop that the poster should be removed because it was likely to attract "*crooks and riffraff*". It is sad to report that not only was the poster duly removed but so was the new clergyman. I wonder how many members of that congregation had ever understood Philip's reading of Luke 5:27-32.

We should all remember that God loves us always just the way we are but also loves us so much that he also wants us to grow too and not always stay that way. He wants us to be ready to change our ideas and thinking.

Many of you will know that I am an amateur astronomer. There is so much we have learned about our universe in recent years as technology has advanced but as we have learned more so we have discovered more and more and conversely how much we don't know. That is the same with God. When I look up in the night sky I am continually amazed at the awesomeness of God's creation and stare in wonder at the infinity of space and time.

Pre-conceived ideas and a lack of willingness to allow ourselves to be subject to change can stunt our growth – just like a pot-bound plant. We can nurture it, feed it, water it but unless we are prepared to alter its environment, to seek out a new larger pot for it it will not reach its full potential.

There is a lovely film called "Being There". In this film a simple-minded fellow called Chance (played by Peter Sellers), is a gardener who has resided in the Washington, D.C., townhouse of his wealthy employer for his entire life and been educated only by watching television and his experience of gardening. He is forced to vacate his home when his boss dies. While wandering the streets, dressed smartly in his former employer's morning suit and bowler hat, looking a lot like a Freemason off to a lodge meeting, he encounters a business mogul Ben Rand (Melvyn Douglas), who assumes Chance to be a fellow upper-class gentleman. Soon Chance is ushered into high society, as Mr. "Chauncey Gardiner" (really *Chance the Gardener*) and his unaffected gardening wisdom makes him the talk of the town including a post as adviser to the President of the United States when Chance's remarks about how the garden changes with the seasons are interpreted by the President as economic and political advice, relating to the President's concerns about the mid-term unpopularity that many administrations face. "*When the Autumn comes it is time to sweep away the dead leaves*" is interpreted as advice to the President to sack some of his oldest advisers. If you haven't seen the film then a similar plot occurs when in an episode of *Father Ted*, the character of Father Jack, the drunken old priest, is taught to repeat the phrase "*that would be an ecumenical matter*" whenever a bishop asks him a difficult theological question with devastating results for the bishop who has a crisis of faith.

The illustration here is that it is so easy to be taken in by our own pre-conceptions about people and their positions in society – by how they dress or what organisations they belong to, what job they do or where they live. Jesus had no such illusions. He came for everybody – rich, poor, sick, healthy, religious, non-religious and so on. Once we dispense with those pre-conceptions we are really ready to grow.

Our Order has a wonderful opportunity to grow if we, the members, look to the example of Jesus Christ in the way we connect with each other and with those outside of Freemasonry. I am proud to call myself a Freemason and never tire of being gladdened when I read of some many wonderful initiatives and support which we in Wiltshire have started or become involved with.

Being like Christ, being faithful to God and our calling is indeed giving time for others, as Jesus did when he had supper with Matthew and the other "sinners" ; but we must also allow ourselves some value time to be ourselves too and put aside our own egos; being there for God, being there for others, being there for ourselves and being our true selves – the person God always wanted us to be. Open to change and challenge.

So in summary, we should start every action always with prayer, serve others, be prepared for change and challenge and the unexpected and then we shall truly grow both as individuals and as the wonderful organisation which we are and which others will see and experience – a truly loving and egalitarian one based on brotherly love, relief and truth.

Amen

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