

Face it

Over the last few weeks, there's a story that I've read over and over again to little Eden – a story you'll all know very well – Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. And it starts like this:

Once upon a time, there lived a princess called Snow White. Her father, the King, was dead. Snow White lived with her wicked stepmother, the Queen, in a castle at the edge of a deep, green forest. Snow White was very beautiful. Her skin was as white as snow, her hair as black as ebony wood and her lips were as red as a red, red rose.

The Queen was also very beautiful but terribly vain. She had a magic mirror and every day would look into it and say:

*'Magic mirror on the wall,
Who is the fairest one of all?'*

The mirror would always reply:

'You, O Queen, are the fairest of them all.'

Until one day, the reply changed and it was Snow White who was the fairest one of all. And you know how the story continues.

Unfortunately, too many of us today are a bit like the stepmother in Snow White. We hold the Word of God, the Bible – what James referred to as a mirror – in front of us and often get angry or embarrassed because it is talking to us and about us and we don't like it very much. In discipleship terms, it's 'only the brave' who are willing to look in the mirror and see what is genuinely there and act on it. I don't know about you, but whenever I follow a daily pattern of reading for Lent, using one of the many resources available, I'm immediately confronted by either words from Scripture or the author's commentary on them that sometimes cut to the quick. On Thursday, one of my readings was from Luke 9, where Jesus says, *'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'* The challenge in the commentary to church leaders was *'Are you so preoccupied or weighed down by the needs of others that you've lost sight of your own cross – perhaps even fooling yourself you don't have one. Do you have enough energy left to follow Christ at all, let alone daily?'* And there it was – words of God that you don't quite like so much, that challenge and question you, about which you

know you really should act. How *am* I daily carrying my own cross? What does that look like? What do I need to do differently? *'Do not merely listen to the word,'* says James, *'Do what it says ... for anyone who listens and doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at their face in a mirror, goes away and then immediately forgets what they look like.'*

In today's society we are surrounded by mirrors, or by reflective glass which acts as a mirror – too many and too much. In our homes, in shopping centres, in restaurants, along the street, even on our phones, there we are again and again and again reflected at our best and worst. What we see in the mirror is a significant aspect of who we perceive ourselves to be. We make judgements about ourselves dependent on what we 'see' in the mirror. Perhaps we find ourselves thinking, or even saying, *'I really should lose some weight.'* *'That doesn't suit me,'* *'Is that some grey in my hair?'* *'Where have all those lines come from?'* Perhaps it's not just in fairy tales that we ask, *'Mirror, mirror on the wall – who's the fairest of them all?'*

Mirrors have become such a powerful force for us all today, regardless of age, gender or stage of life. Our youngsters are firmly part of the 'selfie generation' with images posted on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, out there for everyone to assess and judge – to 'like' or ignore. Phone filters are the way forward, so I'm told. We can enhance ourselves – make our eyes look bigger, our noses smaller, give ourselves the perfect ears. Whatever we choose, we have the capacity to make ourselves look different and change people's perceptions of us – but it's not reality.

Similarly, our culture holds up mirrors to us so often that we use that reflection to define who we are. We are what we wear, where we shop, where we live, where we go on holiday. And sadly, we far too easily trust what the media holds up in front of us, failing to recognise its distortion. We don't realise that we're being presented with a false or fake reality.

An article titled, 'The Loneliness of Donald Trump' addresses something of this issue. Listen to the words of Rebecca Solnit, the author of the article:

'The child who became the most powerful man in the world, had run a family business and then starred in an unreality show based on the fiction that he was a stately emperor of enterprise ... and each was a hall of mirrors made to flatter his sense of self, the self that was his one edifice he kept raising higher and higher and never abandoned.'

I have often run across men (and rarely, but not never, women) who have become so powerful in their lives that there is no-one to tell them when they are cruel, wrong, foolish, absurd. In the end, there is no one else in their world, because when you are not willing to hear how others feel, when you do not care, you are not willing to acknowledge others' existence. That's how lonely it is at the top. It's as if these petty tyrants live in a world without honest mirrors, without others, without gravity, and they are buffered from the consequences of their failures.'

But, if we're honest, we *all* choose our mirrors, choose the standards we feel we already conform to, or choose the people who will only tell us what we want to hear, rather than those who will lovingly keep us accountable. What James tells us in our reading today is that only those who are determined to become followers of Jesus will have the courage to let the Word of God be their mirror over the mirrors of society that we can scarcely avoid, or the comfortable mirrors that might show a more favourable reflection.

The season of Lent is typically a time for honest self-examination and reflection. When, through a discipline of daily reading and prayer, we can not only just *look* in the mirror, look deeply – the mirror that is Scripture – but also be changed by it. For the mirror that Christ holds up to us is a reflection that not only changes us but also inspires us. Its purpose, particularly at Lent, is to show us our frailties and failures, but also to enable us to see how Christ sees us and how we can be transformed. It neither flatters nor floors us. While it almost certainly will require courage to look deeply in the mirror, and bravery to respond to what we see, it is an experience entirely hopeful and grace-filled as we co-operate with the Lord himself in being transformed as his disciples.

Remember, Scripture tells us that he is the one who sees us as '*fearfully and wonderfully made*', who has '*lavished his love*' upon us. We are his masterpiece, his work of art. These are beautiful and affirming words. Perhaps if we spent more time looking into *that* mirror we would value ourselves more highly and have a more Christ-like perspective on who we are.

So, as disciples of Jesus, how can our thinking, our attitudes, and our actions be impactful? How can we let them make a difference?

Well, we can use this time of Lent productively and allow ourselves to be shaped by God's word. There are lots of opportunities to engage with and respond to Scripture. Why not join one of the Lent groups that are meeting

over the next five weeks? Ask me for details and I'll give you the information. The theme this year is one of pilgrimage.

If you're not into groups or prefer your own space and time, why not follow a personal Lent guide. I've brought lots with me today that I've collected over the years. You're very welcome to borrow one as long as you promise to return it! There are also Apps for Lent that you can download to your phone or tablet.

Why not commit to read the Bible in a year – there are loads of plans to help you do this – in book form, online, or again through an App. Nicky Gumbel's 'Bible in One Year' comes highly recommended, with the passages emailed to you each day with a commentary which aims to link them together on a theme.

If you're not keen on reading, you can listen to the Bible in your car or on your phone. David Suchet reads the Bible beautifully – you can also imagine he's in the room! You could even learn to sing the Psalms and learn Scripture that way.

Or perhaps you and some friends could read the Bible together or do the Wisdom Challenge. This entails reading one chapter of Proverbs each day for thirty-one days and sharing or posting the verse that most stands out to you from that passage. Or why not choose one of the gospels.

If these don't appeal to you, I encourage you to find something that does. There are many options out there. Don't be hard on yourself if you miss a day. Aim for two or three good sessions a week but try to get into a pattern. Until we get to *know* God's Word, we won't really be able to look into it and allow it to change us. Let's be those who don't just *look* into the mirror - God's Word – and forget what it says, but those who commit to *do* what it says and allow ourselves to be transformed as a result.

Let's pray:

Lord, thank you that you give us wisdom generously. Thank you that you love to bless us when we persevere. Thank you that you will bless us when we look closely at your Word and then do something about what we see there. We commit ourselves afresh to following you. Amen.