

Just As I Am – Sermon Trinity 10 2016

Ecclesiastes 1 vv 1-14 p668, Ecclesiastes 2 vv 18-23 p669, Colossians 3 vv 1-11 p1184, Luke 12 vv 13-21 p1045

How many failures are there in this church this morning? I know that there is at least one – standing right here in this pulpit. I'm sure there are more. We didn't get off to a very good start. The psalmist says, *Behold I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me.* The implication of the New Testament is that the psalmist speaks for all of us. We were all *shapen in wickedness: and in sin did our mothers conceive all of us.*

So, not a good start. What about a year or two after that? When did you learn to walk and talk? Were you advanced for your age or did you lag behind other children? Did your mothers brag about you to the other mothers or did they worry that you might be retarded? And your own children, did they shine in the mother and toddler group or were you embarrassed by their behaviour? Did you feel that other parents were judging you?

So off to school. How many of us were picked last for the sports team? Or what if we were team captains? Did we choose our friends first, irrespective of ability and fairness? Were we sometimes spiteful in excluding people whom we didn't like or perhaps were afraid might be better than us? If we were good at games, did we take an unseemly pride in our abilities?

How did you do in tests and exams? Did you always get good marks? If not, did you feel lazy or just plain stupid? What did other people think about you: your parents, teachers, friends? Were they disappointed in you or proud of you? If you got good marks, could you have done still better if you'd tried harder? Maybe adults told you that, if you didn't try hard at school, you'd get a lousy job when you left. Are you ashamed or resentful that you didn't reach what you considered to be your potential in life and wound up doing something for a living that left you unfulfilled and poorer than you thought you deserved to have been? If you won all the prizes and got 100% in everything, did that make you insecure, afraid of failing next time? Or did it make you arrogant, seeing yourself as better than everybody else, the people you think of as losers?

Did you have the chance to learn a musical instrument, but fail to practise? Were you popular at school? Or were you too shy to join in? If other people didn't like you, was it down to them or down to you? Was there something about you that other boys and girls made fun of? Or were you a bully? A Billy no mates or the life and soul of the party everybody was jealous of? Or were you something in between, just mediocre at everything, hardly noticed by anyone, nothing special?

And now you're grown up. How do you feel about yourself now? What about your weight? That's something a lot of people are dissatisfied with about themselves. Last Sunday, someone told I was looking lean. That sounded good, but, on Monday, a passer by in the street remarked that I'd put it on since I gave up running. Or your skin, have you got wrinkles or spots, are you like what S Paul says the Church is – *not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish?* If not, is it because you are not worth it as the L'Oreal brand advertisement would have it? How do you think other people see you? Do you care? Should you care? Have you ever been introduced to somebody you wanted to impress only to find you didn't know what to say to them? Are you uncomfortable in social gatherings, a wallflower? Or

could you be the loud boor everybody else wishes hadn't come to the party? Does it worry you what impression you make on others? Do you instinctively know how to fit in or do you always worry that you might do the wrong thing? Do you turn up in tails to what turns about to be an informal barbecue or wear jeans to the theatre only to find yourself seated next to the Queen in the royal box? Are you insecure or self-satisfied?

Does it worry you that you aren't richer, wiser, better-looking, more popular, more important? Do you see yourself as a failure? And, even if you are pretty proud of yourself and what you have achieved, do you ever think, like Solomon in our OT lesson, that it's all pointless anyway, because you're going to die one day and everything you've done with your life will crumble to dust? One of my favourite bible verses is the one in today's Gospel, when Jesus says, *for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth*. (I like tongue twisters!) If, however your life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which you possess, are you comfortable with what your life does consist of? Do you even know what your life consists of?

Well my task today is to cheer you up and make you feel good about yourself. There are various strategies everyone could be recommended to try for him or herself? You could make up your mind that it is sufficient to do your best. No-one should judge you for not doing what you can't do. Neither should you judge yourself for failing to do the impossible. Know your limits. Accept life as it is. Don't take too much notice of what other people think. *Sticks and stones may brake my bones, but words can never hurt me*. Ask yourself whether it really matters that you can't play the piano like Rachmaninov or ride a bike like Chris Froome. Take a proper pride in your achievements. We're often our own severest critics and don't realise that we have made a difference and are appreciated by other people.

What really is important? In the end does it really matter if you are clever or good-looking or if you are rich or famous or a great athlete? Isn't what really matters that you are a good person, loving and kind, generous and warm-hearted? Isn't your relationship with God the most important thing in your life? What does He care about? What sort of person does He want you to be? Don't your relationships with other people in the end matter more than all those things which can be measured and assessed? *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!* I'm sure we should make the best possible use of the talents, opportunities and resources God gives us, but won't the best use of our lives be in serving God and other people rather than in self-aggrandisement and worldly success?

Don't do yourself down. Instead of seesawing between arrogant self-confidence and craven self-disgust, take S Paul's advice: *For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith*. In other words, be realistic about yourself and what God has made you. Don't make out that you are better or worse than you are, least of all to yourself. Don't think of yourself as more lowly than you really are, even in your own private thoughts. And no false modesty. There is no room for any kind of falsehood in the Christian religion. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Nevertheless, we are judged by other people all the time. Sometimes this is necessary. If we are plausibly accused of wrong-doing, we must expect to face judgment. If we apply for a job, our abilities and personality have to be assessed. If someone is thinking about asking us out on a date, presumably they will make some judgment about us first. We are also, however, continually judged by people who have no right to judge us often in matters which are not their business. Have we the grace to ignore them or, better still, to deal with them lovingly? We also continuously judge ourselves. At least I do. I don't know about you. And we judge others.

Jesus said, *Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.* Profound words which require a good deal of pondering, but one implication is surely that, if we are judgmental about other people, we should not be surprised if we are judged ourselves, even by ourselves. As you all know, I am very bad at accepting criticism. I often suspect that one of the reasons I can't take criticism from others is that I am so critical of other people and also of myself. It says something that the English word *critic* comes from the Greek word for a judge, κριτης. Now a κριτης could equally find in your favour or against you, acquit or condemn, but, such is human nature, the word *critic* has come nearly always to mean someone who finds fault. As George Bernard Shaw supposedly once said, *To my critics, these pearls*, an atheist who knew his Sermon on the Mount!

Now we come to the real point of this sermon. In all my insecurities I'm very comforted by St Paul's words in I Corinthians 4^{3&4}: *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not my own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.* St John goes further and is even more comforting in his first letter chapter 3¹⁹⁻²¹: *And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God. We don't have to justify ourselves. It doesn't matter what other people think of us. It's not important what we think of ourselves. God loves us as we are. Jesus has done everything necessary for our justification. We don't have to feel insecure or anxious about our place in the world. Our New Testament reading from Colossians is all about our freedom. We are free from sin. Christ has paid the price by His death on the Cross. We belong to Him and He belongs to us. *I am my beloved's and He is mine and His banner over me is love. We are safe and secure in the Rock of all Ages and His banner over us is love.* We are dead to sin; dead to the flesh, ordinary, fallen human nature, conceived in sin and shapen in wickedness; dead to death itself. We don't have to feel guilty or inadequate or insignificant. We are what we are by the grace of God. Christ died for everyone of us. You can't ask to be loved more than that, can you? Fellowship with Him, eternal life, is His free gift to us. The paradox is that we lost our freedom because we failed to love God and so we became anxious and fearful, and rightly so, but, because God loves us with infinite love, He sent Jesus to offer Himself in love for us, to set us free from sin and death in order that we should live His risen life in the Holy Spirit. By His grace, we are set free to live His commandments, to love unconditionally, one in Christ with all the redeemed of the Lord. We are set free to serve Him Whose service is perfect freedom.*

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