

Junior Church: Young Peoples' Group
Some Thoughts for the Week Beginning 5th July 2020

Hello Everyone,

Here we are in July! The messy transition from full lockdown to the 'new normal' continues. The Prime Minister and his ministers are under scrutiny for their handling of the pandemic with lots of people quick to judgment and happy to tell him where he has gone wrong. Reputations are on the line and popularity waxes and wanes. How will we view the performance of key players during the pandemic in 5, 10 or 50 years? Will the historians be kind or critical? How we form our judgments is something I'd like to look at in these thoughts.

A considerable amount of my email traffic at work this week was about anti-social behaviour by young people who have limited schooling and no places to meet. In this void, damage is being caused to parks and open spaces, litter is being strewn everywhere and there is noise and disturbance to nearby communities. Many people are sympathetic to the circumstances facing young people and others are quick to judgment and wanting harsh punishments to be given out.

Those of you interested in football will have heard of Ian Wright. He played for Arsenal and was a very successful goal scorer. Now he is a football pundit on TV and radio. He wrote his autobiography in 2016 and dedicated it to his teacher, Sidney Pigden, who he described as 'the greatest man in the world'. Ian had a difficult childhood and never had much affection or interest shown to him. As a result he was difficult himself and was not much interested in school. Mr Pigden formed a relationship with Ian by giving him responsibility. 'I don't know why he chose me, but he did. I felt really good. I just felt important. He just gave me a sense of feeling like I had some use'. When others judged Ian Wright not to be worth the effort, Sidney Pigden gave him a chance, perhaps because he saw a child on the margins who would respond to care and nurturing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omPdemwaNzQ>

I think we all have experience or memories of teachers who have influenced us. When I was a student I took a course in biblical studies. The lecturer was Rev Stalker. I think he must have been in his 80s then. He was dour Scot and his lectures were not very exciting. He would slowly and unsteadily climb the rostrum, pour water into a glass from which he would take sips until the lecture was complete. On one occasion, before he arrived, a group of students removed the water and put gin in its place. As the lecture started he took a sip of the liquid, but there was no reaction. Throughout the lecture he continued to sip. At the end he stepped down and walked towards the door. He then paused, looked round and said: 'I'll have the same again next week'. We had misjudged him. He had a sense of humour and fun that had not been apparent. From that moment onward I saw him in a different light. In the end he left me with a love of the Bible and especially the Book of Job.

We make judgments about people very early on and then look for evidence that reinforces our prejudices. Judgments are often black or white and do not reflect the complexity of people's lives and personalities.

I heard this week the story of Susanna Cibber. She was the 18th century equivalent of Vera Lynn. She was a celebrated singer with a big following and a friend of the composer Frederick Handel. Her home life was complicated and she was involved in a scandal that ruined her reputation. In Handel's music for The Messiah there is a piece that sets to music words from Isaiah 53.3. The prophet predicts the coming of Jesus, his rejection and ultimate death. The verse begins: 'He was despised and rejected of men'. The music was written for Susanna and when she sang it in St Patrick's Cathedral, with an emotion that may have reflected her own rejection, the chancellor of the cathedral rose from his seat shouting: 'Woman for this be all thy sins forgiven thee'. She regained her reputation and is buried in Westminster Abbey.

We often reserve our harshest judgments for people who are different and who we don't understand. Jesus stood out because he found qualities in people rejected by society and on the margins. These were the type of people you didn't want to be seen with: the Samaritan woman at the well, the tax collector, the leper. They didn't do much for your street credibility and Jesus' reputation amongst the powerful and influential people of his day suffered as a result. But Jesus was different and he identified with the despised and rejected because he was himself despised and rejected.

In our Bible reading this week ([Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30](#)) Jesus recognizes how the judgments of people work. In verse 18 and 19 he criticizes the people for rejecting John the Baptist because of his lifestyle, and condemning Jesus for the same reason and for the company he kept. But Jesus knew that God's judgment was more important than that of his peers. He saw that our judgments are too often made on the basis of a superficial assessment of who we are; the clothes we wear or whether we are part of the crowd. He recognized that people's lives are often complicated and messy and that we need an arm around us to make us feel better about ourselves and valued by those who matter to us. Above all, He knew that, whatever our reputation and the mistakes we have made, redemption is open to all of us.

Have a great week and take care of yourselves.

Rodney