13th Sunday after Trinity (Year B)
'Take a look in the mirror'

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" So said the Evil Queen in the children's fairy tale Snow White. Every morning, she asked her Magic Mirror the same question and the mirror always replied: "My Queen, you are the fairest in the land." She was pleased because the magic mirror never lied. However, once Snow White reached the age of seven, she become even more beautiful than the Queen, so when the Queen then asked her mirror, it responded: "My Queen, you are the fairest here so true. But Snow White is a thousand times more lovely, fair and beautiful than you." Because of this the Evil Queen then sought to have Snow White killed.

I wonder what you see when you look in your mirror. I imagine that it depends when you look i.e., first thing in the morning when you have just awoken and look dishevelled will be very different from when you have washed and made yourself more presentable.

When you see your reflection in a mirror you are not seeing your true image rather a reverse image. What you really look like can only be seen in a true mirror which can be made by joining two mirrors at right angles side by side like the cover of a book.

The bible teaches us that humankind were created in the image of God. However, that image has become marred or distorted as a result of sin. When God looks at us, he does not look at our outward appearance, rather he looks at our hearts, our innermost thoughts and intentions. That which is sometimes not always apparent visibly.

Our New Testament epistle this morning comes from the letter of James. It is essentially instructions for believers on how to live the Christian life. It has a strong emphasis on living lives characterised by wholeness and integrity. That is outward behaviour that is congruent with our inner heart and motives. Those who do so, do not need to wear 'masks' to keep up outward appearances of being religious but rather let the natural beauty and light of God shine through in their lives.

In verse 19 James refers to the recipients of his letter as 'beloved' or greatly/much-loved. The same word is used in the Song of Songs which some commentators suggest refers to love of God for the

community of faith. As Christians, people who are in Christ, we are likewise beloved of God. Lovers as we all know give and receive love. It is obvious for all to see when a couple are in love because their outward behaviour reflect how they feel for each other. Likewise, as Christians, our love for God should be evident by our actions. There should be a congruence between our inner and outward life. A heart renewed by God will display Christ-like behaviour, whilst conversely, a cold and hard heart will reflect the opposite.

James writes about people who hear God's words but do nothing. He uses the analogy of a mirror. "Like those who look at themselves in a mirror, for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they look like." (James 1: 23-24). What we see when we look in a mirror is a fleeting glimpse – a snapshot of who we are at a particular moment in time. As soon as we go away, we forget and have to go back again and again. This James contrasts with the "perfect law", the "law of liberty" that enables us as Christians to see ourselves as we truly are in Christ and live our lives in wholeness and integrity.

The scribes and Pharisees were frequently on the receiving end of Jesus' harshest criticism for their hypocrisy and lack of integrity. They were outwardly very religious knew and sought to obey all the Jewish religious laws. Yet Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah said of them: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching precepts as doctrines" (Mark 7:6). Jesus pointed out that it was not the outward things relating to ritual cleansing that defiled a person rather "…it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.' (7:15).

James in his letter offers his Christians readers some advice on how to live integral lives. They should be "quick to listen" and "slow to speak and anger". They should "bridle their tongue and not deceive their hearts. Otherwise, their religion was worthless. True religion was defined by outward actions that reflect the love of God. For example, in practical ways – to care for orphans and widows and keep themselves unstained from the world. (1:27).

I don't know how many time a day that you look at your face in the mirror. Next time why not establish the habit of asking yourself the question: "Am I reflecting God in my life?" If the answer is "no"; what do I need to do to correct it? Amen.

Rev Andrew Jacobson
29th August 2021