

Matthew 23:1-12

Getting a true perspective

Telescopes and spectacles

Referees have always been on the receiving end of jibes about their inability to see – and for the most part – they take it in good part. No ref can see everything but often the criticism isn't that they can't see, but they can't see things the same way as their critics. It is amazing how were the exact same scenario to occur only with the team colours reversed, those shouting for a penalty would be dismissing such claims and instead shouting "It was a dive!". We all look at things from different perspectives, however many of us have great difficulty in looking at things from anything other than our own point of view. To quote Burns "To a Louse" - O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us! It is perhaps no coincidence that the hapless Jenny, fine lady sporting her decorated bonnet unaware of the presence of the louse, was IN CHURCH. This passage might be used in support of a campaign to do away with ministers' robes and so on, but frankly that is the least of its import. I wouldn't get too worked up about them one way or other. What is much more significant is how we view ourselves with respect to others, with respect to GOD. I can take the jibes against referees – I can see why clergy are often the butt of jokes – caricatured by cartoonist and tv sitcoms alike but I wouldn't accept the premise that that signifies reality.

Telescopes and binoculars are of use ONLY IF they are used properly. They need to be in focus, they need to have the intended object in their field of vision BUT first and foremost the viewer needs to be looking through them from the right end! I'm a great believer in stating the obvious – it applies to many aspects of life. But look through a

telescope the wrong way and you completely defeat its purpose. Instead of magnifying the image, you end up minimising it, probably to the point of it being so tiny that it is barely visible. We have a remarkable inability to see ourselves as others see us and the most common type of spectacles in the world (though rarely prescribed) are those of the rose tinted variety – especially when used in conjunction with a mirror – or when considering ourselves and our own work! Not surprisingly Jesus has an alternative view!

Nae sellie, sellie, sellie

There has always been a propensity for us to focus on ourselves and to discount the significance of others and relating to them. It isn't only toddlers who have a profound sense of ownership – “mine!” Adults including some world leaders seem to have a sad but remarkable knack of holding on to a selfish world view that is often predicated on a belief that they can do no wrong, that they know best, that they will take no telling, that everything American/British/Chinese/European/Russian/Scottish (delete as required) is BEST and that unwittingly or otherwise (often by design) they will deprecate all others in some fashion or another – sometimes quite pointedly and with offence. You and I have no say in the United States Presidential elections – but they need our prayers. All our leaders need our prayers but getting a better perspective and world view is particularly true for those whose every word or tweet are latched on to. The difficulty is that if our world view is based primarily on us being important/right/significant it is all too easy not just for us to ignore or do down others but for relationships to be destroyed. Isolation and distance heightens the risk of conflict, injustice, poverty and all manner of negative consequences – on all sides including those who believe their position is invincible and inviolate. Image is NOT everything! History has a remarkable ability to burst the bubbles of self importance

but it can be a trying time for many who have to live through periods of rule by those who are too full of their own importance and have little ability to see themselves as others see them. I have a good few American friends but while you will see I have grave reservations about American politics I can assure you that we are by no means immune from Jesus' warnings in Matthew – in the UK, in Scotland and even within the Church. Jesus advocates a world view that is outward looking, self giving and generously well disposed towards others, and most of all geared to honouring and acknowledging the love of God in Christ. We talk about looking after No 1 meaning that our own interests come first. In fact, sadly, that can mean a self-orientated priority that results in a sellie first, second and last mentality, which is destructive of good relationships and inherently and fundamentally directly opposed to God's core priority of sharing the self giving love of Jesus and allowing love to change society, change lives so that we live in harmony with one another and at peace with God. So nae sellie, sellie sellie here please!

No vacuum

The old idiom nature abhors a vacuum is worth bearing in mind here. It isn't sufficient to call into question or even pull down the pretence of self-adulation and self-righteousness of politicians or others even church leaders without putting forward a suitable alternative – for it is true that ere long someone else would be along with a different portfolio of policies that sounded innovative, perhaps even more kind and considerate but actually, we need more than a tweak here and there, we need to see that NONE OF US has the answer to the human predicament apart from GOD. Only Jesus is entitled to say “Come to ME and I will give you rest”, and he says that on the basis not of the best manifesto, policies or branding but because in love he laid down his life for us and lives to give us forgiveness and new life. The scribes and Pharisees

come in for a lot of criticism from Jesus because as religious leaders whose task was to lead people in the ways of God, support their worship and encourage them to live out lives which demonstrated God's plans and purposes in action – they had instead homed in on themselves and prided themselves on their own importance. Taking power and influence to themselves, forgetting the imperative to serve and care for the people they had, in effect, substituted themselves for God. Instead of pointing people towards God and helping them to worship and serve God, they had encouraged people to serve them. The passage has very little to do with whether or not ministers should wear robes, it has everything to do with ensuring that all of us, religious leaders, church members, political leaders, others with influence and a large following and ordinary citizens like you and me – that we look through the telescope from the right end, that we don't get grand ideas thinking more highly of ourselves than we should, and that we recognise that it is GOD who is No 1, not us, and that the best future for us as individuals, as a congregation, as a community, nation and as a world is if we change our world view and align ourselves with the plans and purposes of God, centred on the self giving love of his Son, who died and rose again so that we might enjoy and share in life in all its fulness now and throughout eternity, life in loving relationship to one another and to God. That is the positive that we must substitute for the selfish and self-defeating focus on self interest.

There will always be those who are thrilled to the belief that the only way to improve things is to focus on what is best for me personally, for No 1, who consciously or unconsciously then fail to take the needs of others into account, forgetting that we are all in it together. The President of the World Health Organisation argued recently that being selfish about a vaccine for the coronavirus and looking only at national interests was self-defeating, simply because the virus is no respecter of borders! Selfishness,

far less self adulation and self righteousness is not only wrong, it also is self defeating. We need to allow the Holy Spirit of God entry into our hearts, lives and fellowships so that he might transform our attitudes and actions to conform to the self giving loving purposes of Jesus. Yes, we will all be affected by the result of the US Elections – the world will – but whatever happens our response and the world's to Jesus' call to follow him, to love and serve rather than seeking to further our own interests is even more significant. For whatever anyone thinks, no human being is No 1 – and if they think that they are seriously mistaken. Put JESUS first – for the future of the world!

May the Lord bless you. Amen.