

Recognition - 3 July 2022.

The *Goon Show* - beloved radio comedy show of the 1950's and 60's in Britain - featured the voices of Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, and Michael Bentine. Major Bloodnok, asks Eccles, "Don't you know who I am?" To which Eccles replies, "No". "Pity," says Bloodnok, "I was hoping you could tell me."

Daft though this is, it raises a simple question for us; do we recognize who people are?

My mother, when she was alive, used to love to go to a small hotel called 'The Bridge' at Buttermere in the Lake District of England. The owners were a delightful couple called Rodney and Rosemary Twitchen. He ran the

bar and she cooked. In the bar was a wooden figure on a shelf along with the optics - a small model of a backpacker. The story went that if he was facing out into the bar, then all was well in the pub, but if he was facing towards the wall, then that meant there was a jerk of some kind in the bar, and to keep your stories to yourself and your weather eye open.

One day, an Olympic-calibre jerk entered the bar, and having ordered his beer, proceeded to tell all who would listen about his amazing feats of mountaineering. The figurine on the bar was promptly turned to face the wall. Eventually, one by one, Rodney's regulars were driven out of their favourite watering-hole by this immense bore, until only one man was left,

sitting on his own in a corner with his drink. Not to be defeated, the prat-of-the-year candidate trapped said gentleman in his corner and continued to regale the man with his heroic exploits.

Eventually, enough was enough, and the cornered man made his polite excuses and also left - leaving the bar deserted, save for Rodney the barman, and the aforesaid Olympic jerk. Strutting up the bar, he noticed the figurine and keen to have things correct, notified Rodney; "I say, did you know that your little chappie on the optic rail is facing the wrong way?"

"No, he's not," replied Rodney, "he faces that way when we have a berk in the bar."

"Oh really?" says the vacant idiot, "what a drôle idea!! By the way, who was that chap I was talking to in the corner? - he didn't say much."

"That was Sir Edmund Hillary - you know, the man who climbed Everest."

This is a true story, but the point of it is that our ability to recognize people is often not as good as we think it is. I'm not talking here about remembering names or even faces, but recognizing people for who they are or what they represent.

Let's just shuffle through the readings a bit and see if we can make any sense of them with that thought in mind.

Naaman is a big, important guy - 'a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, but - like a few examples I mentioned last week, he had ego issues. He was not too pleased that Elisha wouldn't come out of his house to see him and 'wave his hands over him' to cure him of his leprosy. He doesn't feel as though he has been appropriately treated for the fine fellow that he is. Fortunately, he listens to his servants and does what Elisha asked him to do - and is cured.

But my point is this - he doesn't really recognize who Elisha is, and Elisha not going out to see him is Elisha's way of saying, 'It is not ME that is healing you - it is my God.'

Once Naaman is cured, he then realizes that Elisha's God is the Lord.

I won't go on with the rest of the story, as that would spoil the surprise ending, so you should go home and read it for yourselves if you don't already know it.

Galatians has us figuratively looking under your tunic to see if you can be recognized. Paul says that whether you are circumcised or not has no place in the kingdom of heaven, and has nothing to do with your faith in Christ. Nor is it of any value if you think that you will avoid persecution for being a Christian, just because you have had your rocket trimmed - 'look what happened to me!', Paul says.

So far I have said nothing of any great import at all, but I hope that is about to change.

Jesus's sending out of the 72 disciples has huge implications for us. This may be a small piece of a manuscript that was written a couple of thousand years ago, but if we believe in the resurrection - which we must, if we claim to be Christian, as it is a basic tenet of our Creeds - but the commissioning of the 72 is no less than the commissioning of ALL disciples that Jesus gives at the end of Matthew's gospel; 'Go and make disciples of all nations...'

Now recognition plays into this commission in a big way; we are to recognize those who are

receptive to the gospel, and leave alone those who are not. That sounds simple, but it isn't. How many people do you know who say they are Christian but never set foot inside a church? How many people do you know who say that they want to give up smoking, but never get around to it? How many people do you know who say they will do something, but you know full well that they won't - it's just words?

But it goes deeper than that; Jesus talks about being able to step on snakes and scorpions without harm. That requires that we know and recognize our danger, and are able to trust in God to save us from the venom of such creatures.

In Matthew's version of this commission, Jesus only sends out 12 disciples, but the instructions are almost identical, except that Jesus tells his disciples to be 'as shrewd as snakes, and innocent as doves.' I think he is saying, 'Don't be gullible, but at the same time, learn to trust.'

In order to manage both these instructions, a high degree of people-recognition is required. Some folk find this harder than others, and find themselves in disastrous relationships before they know it, and trying hard to get out of a bad situation that, with a little more foresight, might not have ever occurred.

I'm not sure that I have a lot of foresight, but what I do have is intuition - supposedly a female trait, but they don't have the monopoly on it, I'm pleased to say.

Whatever personal skill or natural ability we bring to bear on our relationships, it is essential that we ensure that they are positive, affirming, mutual, and hopefully have a depth of spirituality that underpins them.

If we look at the gospel that we read, we see that the disciples are cock-a-hoop that 'even the demons submit to us in your name!' The point is they recognize who the demons are, and the demons recognize that they bring the power of Jesus to defeat them.

This childlike joy is highlighted by Jesus in the verse that we didn't read at the end of the gospel, but I will now: 'At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'

The disciples were not educated men or skilled in philosophy or dialectic - but yet they knew who they were dealing with - they recognized the truth from the lie.

My message today may not seem all that important to you right now, but believe me, if you look back on your life, how many of the

screw-ups that you made were the result of not recognising the serpent or scorpion that you were cuddling?

Can we recognize the truth from the lie? Do we know who we can trust and who we must be wary of?

Being wary of someone does not necessarily mean we should avoid or shun them, but rather challenge them to be honest. It doesn't hurt to say, 'I don't believe you.'

In the same way, when you meet someone that you instinctively trust and feel that a relationship would be a positive thing, it doesn't hurt to tell them why you feel this way

- because you have been led to them by the Holy Spirit, which, we are told, 'will lead us into all truth.'

Now we come to the harder part; there are some people - let's be honest here - who we find utterly repellent, who we would in the Royal Navy have called a waste of rations or an oxygen thief. If my dog doesn't like you - then you don't have much of a chance with me either.

BIG problem: as I wrote in my Meanderings on Cruelty this week (if you read them), cruelty mars the image of God within us; but then so

does our instinctive recoil from certain individuals.

If we believe that we are formed in the image of God, then there **must** be something of Jesus within all of us.

That is very hard to believe when we look at the vile dictators of the world, the power-hungry, selfish, callous people that we wish would cease to exist.

Then accept the corollary, that even the most saintly of us has a dark side, even if it's only one blemish. Imagine the Yin/Yang symbol - the circle which is half white and half black, but within the white half is a small black

circle, and within the black half is a small white circle.

I think that what happens with some folk (if I may use an analogy), is that the 'good' people find that their whole symbol is taken over by white - but the small black disc remains, as a reminder that they, too, are not perfect. For the bad guys, their whole symbol is taken over by black, but again, with their small white disc remaining - as a possibility of redemption.

So for us now - concentrating on the issue of recognition this morning - our job is to find that small white disc in the people we see as repellent, because that is the image of Jesus that can never be stamped out. Every saint

has a past - but every sinner has a future. None of us is, or ever will be, perfect this side of grass, but we can teach ourselves and others to learn to recognize the spark of goodness in everyone - with Jesus' help.