

There have been lots of versions of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* over the years. My daughter in law Nicola especially enjoys one with the title *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* – a rather strange plot twist on the original 1813 romantic novel. The novel follows the character development of Elizabeth Bennet the heroine of the book who learns about the repercussions of hasty judgments and comes to appreciate the difference between superficial goodness and actual goodness. Prejudice is a common human failing, and as Paul challenges the Christians in Corinth, one which Christians are not immune from-making hasty and unwise judgments.

There is much confusion in our congregations about "judgment." It is an important Christian word, but because it's important it's important we get our understanding right. We might be vaguely familiar with the theme of the last judgment – and It's there in the creed – he will come to judge (quote) and we misquote Jesus words - "do not judge so that you may be judged" to mean that there should not be any judging whatsoever. Thus the guiding rule of life is to be "nice" at all costs, even if it means ignoring behaviour that is harmful to the community. We therefore fail to challenge and encourage as a consequence.

On the opposite end are those who are consumed by a judgmental attitude. These self-appointed critics wreak havoc with their harsh words, possessing a righteousness that is nothing less than mean. It seems we could use some help sorting out the various meanings of the word "judgment."

The church at Corinth was also wrestling with the issue of judgment. In particular it became personal when they challenged Paul's leadership role in the church (4:3). Christian leaders are human, and have no thicker skin than the rest of the world. In our final look at 1 Corinthians, before we begin Lent – today I want us to focus on the first few verses of chapter 4 - Paul frames the issue of judgment within a much larger horizon. He reminds the Christian community that we are living in these inbetween times. Not only has Christ come, he is coming again. We are spirit-filled, Christ lives in us, yet we are not fully perfect. Christ's return has significant implications for how the community acts in the present and thinks about the future. In our text we can glean at least three lessons on judgment from Paul:

1) You can't judge yourself.

In a remarkable statement, Paul challenges the criticism of the Corinthian church, declaring that "it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you" and then goes on to say "I do not even judge myself" (4:3). We often vacillate between two states, both unhelpful - the sin of arrogance or the fallacy of low self-worth. There are large numbers of people, you might be among them who are extremely hard on themselves. They are convinced that they are not smart enough or not thin enough. In general, they live on the edge of shame, secretly harbouring the conviction that they must be some kind of divine mistake. I frequently suffer from all the above! And there are others who are so convinced of themselves that they are unbearable to be around.

Paul's dismissal of our ability to accurately judge ourselves can be liberating. He insists we simply lack the lenses to gain an objective picture of who we are in. In the Bible, the truth about ourselves only emerges from our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We cannot get an accurate picture on our own because we tend to over or under estimate. Like Paul, it is the Lord who judges us (4:4). That may mean we need reminding that we are fundamentally here because God wants us here-we are created in God's image. Or for some it entails hearing that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As we begin Lent our Ash Wednesday service rightly focuses on our mortality and our need for forgiveness.

2) Judgment must be set alongside love.

The notion that Christians should not be judgmental of others is completely unrealistic. It would be harmful if followed literally. There is a sense in which Christians must not judge, but that has to do with

our eternal destiny and not with how we are to conduct ourselves in our life together. We will deal with this "eternal" dimension in the third and final point in a moment.

It is obvious that Paul feels it is important to judge matters here on earth. After all, most of his letter to the church at Corinth is taken up with criticism of their actions! But we need to pay attention to the way that Paul "judges" the church. The guiding norm for him is the love that has been revealed in Jesus Christ (12:31). This love is not sentimental, based on feelings or emotions. It is rather a love that has been forged in the crucible of a crucifixion. Its goal is not self-glorification (1:13) but rather the building up of the community. It's worth noting how Paul in this passage also describes himself and other leaders both as servants and stewards. But note v1) – servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God – not of the church, nor of church members – Christian leadership has a servant heart to help others, as we looked at last week, grown to maturity, to have the right foundations and to build on them – this can mean challenging others within the life of the church about behaviour and spiritual growth – not ignoring these issues.

In the name of this love Paul can utter harsh judgments about lawsuits, sexual morality, and conduct at the Lord's Supper. However, at the same time Paul can say this church is holy (1:2) and he even identifies it with God's temple (3:16). Paul's judgments of the community at Corinth are not meant to drive people away but to encourage them to reflect the fact that they are the body of Christ (12:27) – a high calling!

3) Our judge has been judged.

As already mentioned, there is a bigger picture here in Paul is operating. Beyond the necessary judging that takes place on the earthly level, Paul also reminds us that there is a Day coming when the Lord will return and "bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God" (4:5). Note that word – commendation, not condemnation – Romans 8:1. So, let's be clear there can be little doubt that Paul saw a day of judgment coming in the future (see Romans 2:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:10). For many of us this day of judgment has been imagined as a time of terror and doom. Michelangelo's great painting in the Sistine Chapel in Rome remains the enduring image: Christ coming at the end of time and separating the saved from the damned. A few years ago now, Helen and I were on holiday near Chartres, and one morning visited a village nearby – we were privileged to see the amazing wallpaintings in the church -where that scene of last judgment was truly horrifically displayed – with a touch of dark humour too, as quite a few of those going down to hell were bishops!

However, Paul does not seem to share the feelings of dread and despair that accompany many Christian reflections on the second coming of Christ. It is true, as it says in our text, that God "will bring to light things now hidden" (4:5). All of our secrets will be revealed; and that might cause us to take stock when we think of doing things we know to be wrong even though others might not see them, knowing that God does and winces! That might be a cause for fear and trembling, but it is noteworthy that Paul does not regard the last day with trepidation. Rather, there is a buoyant confidence that God will strengthen his saints to end, so that they might be blameless (1:8) as they are met by Christ. This changes our view on judgment, can we see what's going on here - Paul's confidence is rooted in the fact that they end of time is in the hands of one who was crucified for his sins. The coming judge himself has been judged: "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Christ coming to meet us has already died our death. No songs of doom on the last day. There is joy in the air as earthly shadows give way to a blinding light.

All of this, as Paul is reflecting in responding to the Corinthian's harsh judgment on him, whether justified or not – points us back to Jesus- our righteous judge, but also our loving lord who died for us. How can our behaviour towards other believers be shaped as we discover how Jesus responded to those he met – the woman caught in a life of sin in John 8, to whom Jesus says 'neither do I condemn you... go and sin no more' or his dealings with Peter – rebuke, yes, challenge, certainly, but even when Peter denies him, Jesus lovingly welcomes him back.

So pray for me, as servant and steward of God – do not judge me too harshly – speak words of encouragement to each other, build each other up, look to the Lord Jesus as our example, the one who died so that we need not be condemned, but commended as we grow into the likeness of Christ.

(prayer)