

Wondering where the Piggies are.... (Matthew 7, 1-12)

(Read whole passage)

This is in some ways a simple and in some ways a teasingly difficult passage, some very basic stuff, and some that can screw your head off if you let it. Most commentators see it in two pieces, 'Judging Others' and 'Ask, Seek, Knock' as in the NIV, but if you want we can divide the first judging part into two sections...

1-2 here is the basic message. Do not judge, or you too will be judged - v 2 just repeats and fleshes out a bit 'for in the same way you judge others, you will be judged and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you'.

Judging is a very normal and satisfying part of life. Our best excuse for it is because we have to; in a dangerous world, we have to assess things and people, to steer a safe course, to survive. So judgements start in our earliest days; we judge whether we will eat the vegetables upon our plate, we judge who we will play with at school. Vegetables may not taste nice and may disagree with us (I always remember Aidan's cry from his bedroom one night 'my carrots have come back'), playmates may decide they need to win all the time and bully and browbeat us. All natural, all unavoidable. You make the right judgements and you end up safe and warm and comfortable. The brussel sprouts are consigned to the kitchen waste bin and you get to the apple pie and custard instead, the rough boys go away to hassle someone else and you have friends round with whom you can play games and win...

Fast forward some years. You have encountered Jesus and got into this thing called the Church. At first your mind is blown by what is offered to you, and what you gratefully accept - unconditional love, forgiveness, a desire to share and pass on goodness. But then the devil stirs and new pleasures creep in as this thing I call **religion** seeps into your being; the love of God is vast and wide and incomprehensible, all rather out-of-our-control, but we can feel safe and warm and comfortable by drawing a circle round ourselves and those who feel like you do, who get it right, who make us feel good. They don't make us eat brussel sprouts, they let us win. To do this we must of course **judge** some people to be **in** the circle and some **outside**, and this is a great religious pleasure. We can feel OK but proving that others are not OK, and have good grounds- even, we think, God's grounds, for doing so!. We may be the only one's to interpret the Bible right, we may have 'the highest standards'; when I was young my mother used to say that in the Salvation Army we 'had higher standards than other people' and say how people had seen vicars smoking pipes, and even knocking them out on the side of the church door before they went in.. Pipe-smoking vicars were the embodiment of human evil.. I felt the tingle of sanctimonious virtue, even then. We were not like them. If I started to enumerate these grounds on which we do this sort of thing, we could go on for ever. Anyone here ever been **judged**? Some card-carrying Christian thought that they and God had it right, and you had it wrong? Sometimes it is appallingly blatant, and you get sad people who are convinced only they (and God of course) are right, and the rest of us are wrong. Often it is much more subtle, and it is particularly subtle when you are looking in the soul's bathroom mirror, because the one you use usually has the odd fault of not showing planks sticking out of eyes.... The natural church is the church-of-one, at some level that is the church we all really want. The horrible danger is that for some people, that is the church they end up with, and it is one too small to fit God into. Hell can be cosy. Their only satisfaction is that they have made the devil smile.

You can all see that, you have been there, you have been on the receiving end of it. Stepping Stones is the sort of church which tends to be inhabited by folks who have at some time been on the receiving end of it; but it **doesn't** mean that we are now free, immune from the temptation. In this world it is the way of things that the oppressed become the next generation of oppressors, you do it

unto them before they get the chance to do it unto you again. We all have the potential to slip straight into the judging habit. And because we are a diverse bunch of folks, there are lots of things we could use as excuses; the chorus that opens the door between you and God may cause me acute gastric discomfort... but I have to love you, and I may not judge you for it. I may wish to play my guitar with the volume knob turned up to 11 and you may not fully appreciate this, but you have to love me, and you may not judge me for it...

It is the **habit of judging**, the one that gives us the secret thrill, that gives us the devil's counterfeit of the security and righteousness that should only come from God himself, that we have to quit. One commentary I read stated that the original text, which includes the present imperative, makes it clear that it is the 'habit of censorious and carping criticism' that Jesus is aiming at here. It is not the 'exercise of the critical faculty on specific occasions'

This takes us to the next bit, the pearls and swine, which from one direction looks really difficult. Jesus is saying 'don't judge', then all of a sudden, a quantum leap and he seems to be saying we have to identifying certain people as dogs or pigs, so as not to give them holy things. Isn't this judgement? This is where 'wondering where the piggies are' comes in. Swine has become a perjorative word... 'Die you Nazi swine' grated Biggles through his clenched teeth as he squeezed the trigger, and the ME-109 spiralled down trailing smoke from its port engine... (were you brought up on this?) Are there people who are so far gone that they must be regarded as unclean beasts, unfit for us even to try and share God's goodness with them? Are there piggies lurking in our midst; when I looked in the mirror this morning was my nose a bit broad and flattened, and my ears, well, a bit large and starting to flap? Are Elaine's comments about the state of my study metaphorical or, in a very real way, true?

Here is a principle. Let's do something sensible. Stand back, and take an overview of both Scripture and the character of God, as we see him through Jesus. Just glance at a couple of his encounters, with women, who were second-rate citizens anyway in those days. One with a Caananite woman (Matt 15, 21-28) who asked for healing for her daughter. Jesus actually talked about throwing the children's bread to the dogs (commentators say he actually said 'puppies') but only as a means of teasing her into a witty response, so he could congratulate her faith and heal the daughter. Then there is the gloriously dodgy bit in John (7.53 to 8.11) which even the NIV will not grant a title to, but only labels it as not included in the 'earliest and most reliable manuscripts' because they daren't put it in, but God made sure it got in later... The woman taken in adultery, no question of avoiding judgement there, but Jesus refuses to condemn. For us judging and condemning go together.

So what does the pearls and swine business mean? It's a verbal cartoon, like the log-in-the-eye joke a few verses before. We must not judge people, we must crack that religious habit, but we must not be fools. There may be times when we do come across the evil in human form, and we need not pretend otherwise. Jesus called Herod a fox, and he did not mean the cuddly brown and inedible Reynard whom unspeakable people still wish to hunt and hound around the English countryside. More often it is about appropriate and inappropriate handling of spiritual things, it is about keeping our mouths shut when we know the person we are talking to will misunderstand or misapply what we might have said; it might even be so inappropriate to where they are at that it will do them harm, become a sin against charity. The poor swine may choke on the pearls, give them a good bucket of steaming swill instead! it's about being careful with what we say rather than judging or condemning potential canine or porcine contacts. It is about doing things that make us feel good under the guise of communicating the gospel or trying to reach the lost. An image that stays with me is of a preacher, along with a small child who gave a testimony and a man who played the accordion, on the promenade at Hartlepool many years ago, carrying on their own evangelical meeting whilst not a soul was listening. Heroic? Or just inappropriate and silly.

On to part 3. Ask, seek and knock. The amplified Bible, which I would have brought but one of its speakers has blown a fuse, says 'if you knock **reverently**'. Is there a specific Hebrew word for reverent knocking as against ordinary knocking? The whole thing relates to the story in Luke 18, 1-7, a little mini-story, another cartoon, about the widow who keeps harassing the judge 'who did not fear God or care about men'; in the end he got so fed up he gave in and granted what she wanted. It is a **how much more** story; how much more will God grant requests to those he loves. In Matthew 7 9-11 it is not a mini-story but the experience of the listeners themselves he uses to make his point. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone - a fish, and give him a snake... (sorry son, I'd have made you a pilchard sandwich but here's a.....LIVE BOA CONSTRICTOR instead! For the third time in a few verses, it is a cartoon exaggeration, first planks sticking out of eyes, then pearls scattered in the pigsty, and now a meal of stones and snakes.

You've all got feelings for your kids he says, so have we. Even with our screwed up humanity and our damaged lives and all the things we can blame Adam and Eve for, all that has gone wrong with being human, something inside still stops us doing the dirty on our kids, there is a bond, a well of affection, a wanting to supply. We can't deny it. I left Aidan at his house in Middlesbrough last week...

Then here comes the application, here comes the Gospel, the blessed basics about God and us. Why do we feel like this? We are made in the image of God, despite all the years, all the genes, all the environments, there is still a bit of God about us, right there in our warp and woof. We love and care for our kids; our cat still loves and washes its kitten. And the secret is, it's all a picture of the reality behind realities, of the light behind the sun, it's another HOW MUCH MORE. It is because God is revealed to us as Father, a word loaded with different connotations for us, depending on our experience of earthly fathers, but at its best meaning he loves us and wants the best for us. Even in this difficult world, where he has given us freedom, and we have messed it all up so badly, behind all the scenes, smaller than the dust and larger than the sky, in the interstices of everything, he is willing us good, wanting us to relate to him, to talk to him, to ask him for what we need. He knows every sparrow falling, he has a tear in his eye when he recalls the beauty of a Brontosaurus reflected in a Mesozoic swamp on a spring morning, he knows all of life, and he cares for his children. He watches as we say 'see you later, give you a ring tomorrow morning - if I remember' and walk out into the ragged and dirty rubbish-strewn streets of the world. We may be the most hopelessly under-equipped and naive guerilla army blundering around in enemy-occupied territory, hapless residents in the Middlesbrough of the universe, but he still longs to give us good gifts.

And of course, the way into the whole thing is this. The best thing he has given, our ticket to the New World, the door by which we enter life, is Jesus himself. Jesus who neither judges nor condemns us; it's our only chance, and if he lets us in, then who are we to judge and condemn. A friend recently told me that she had been taking disadvantaged kids round various places of worship in (sorry) Middlesbrough.. They had been to the mosque, and the iman was a polite and gracious man. The kids had asked him a series of set questions, the same they used at each place of worship. One was how do you get to heaven? He said it was like a great pair of scales; the good deeds you did had to outweigh the bad.... Seems a fair deal, seems sensible, but then when you realise what **we are like**, it becomes desperate and terrible, it's real screaming-on-your-deathbed stuff. At the Roman Catholic cathedral, the Monsignor or whoever told them that they could always come to God, and there was nothing they could do, however bad, that would stop God welcoming them if they came to him.. That was quite a contrast. And apparently that really got through to one or two of the most-troubled kids, because they saw themselves as having done really bad things, and certainly never enough good things to tip any celestial scales in their favour.

Sum up. If we have that forbidden soul-pleasure, that spiritual titillation of judging, say sorry, and kick it out now; but don't throw away your brains as well. And if you are left with empty spaces,

ask God for good gifts to fill them up. The best one is called Grace, his grace to you, then grace in you to pass on to others. You know what he is like; you have seen Jesus,

Don't cast your Pearls before Swine, OINK! OINK!
Don't cast your Pearls before Swine
They will only turn and rend you
Then we all will have to send you
Home in a polythene bag
That will be such a drag
Don't cast your Pearls before Swine OINK! OINK!
Don't cast your Pearls before Swine

Don't cast your Swine before Pearls NO! NO!
Don't cast your Swine before Pearls
Pearls are hard and round and shiny
They roll round deep in the briny
Ocean, the poor piggies will drown
We'll all wear such a frown!
Don't cast your Swine before Pearls, NO! NO!
Don't cast your Swine before Pearls