

## SNAP JUDGMENT

Are first impressions usually right? Many people pride themselves on their ability to make quick judgments about other people or situations. Sometimes they are right; on other occasions they may be wrong. As it is human nature to remember our successes more readily than our failures in life, we can become complacent in our judgment of others.

People tend, for instance, to over-estimate their ability to spot liars. Controlled tests have shown how hard it is to identify someone who is not telling the truth. We think there are certain give-away clues to lying, but in reality there aren't. And in any case, if a liar knows what you think those clues are, they can easily avoid giving them.

We like to style our society today as a tolerant and non-judgmental one, but there are gaping holes in this designation. We can now meet more people in a day than someone living in the middle ages would have encountered in a lifetime. One result is that we form very quick judgments of others because we have little time to make an assessment. Sometimes this is essential: a stranger who approaches you in the street must be sized up speedily. On other occasions we make such calculations lazily, resorting to stereotypes about people based on their looks, weight, clothes and how they speak. We deny that these factors – and others – influence us but in reality they do. Far too often we make misanthropic judgments of others just because we can and because no-one can hear our thoughts. In other words, we say we are non-judgmental but are making endless petty calculations of other based on little evidence in a fast moving world.

Human judgment is clouded, sometimes fatally so. In Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples who others think he is. It is the critical turning point in his ministry. People have had time to watch Jesus closely, to observe his power and to hear his wisdom. There was a buzz about him; opinions were being formed and shaped. Yet the answer he receives is: 'some say you are John the Baptist, but other Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets'. When we are stuck for an opinion, we usually try to make sense of what is in front of us by turning to the past. The people could not imagine that Jesus was unique. We do something similar today when we idly ask: *do you think Lady Gaga is the new Madonna? Or, is Luis Suarez the new Maradona?* Someone may emerge in their own right to earn status – people eventually stopped asking if Andrew Flintoff was the new Ian Botham – but often they are cursed by comparison. In the same way, Jewish people at the time

of Jesus were saying: *'yes, I think Jesus is the new Elijah!'* Except he wasn't.

No sooner had Peter correctly fingered Jesus in this identity parade of prophets than Jesus turned the tables on his friend. When Jesus re-named Simon as Peter, he saw him as the rock on which the Church would be built. Peter had a lot of personal development ahead of him at this point. His denial of Jesus on the night of his arrest seems a pitiful failure and in our modern culture of unsparing judgment would probably have disqualified him from such leadership. Jesus, by contrast, saw the potential in Peter and his restoration on the shore of Lake Galilee some time after the resurrection helped to shape Peter into the name he had inherited, showing the role that others play in our character formation.

Jesus' naming of Peter must have raised eyebrows at the time, for Peter was impatient, mercurial and prone to rashness – qualities which are almost the antithesis of how we view good leadership in our churches today. The people around Peter probably had his character summed up and would have been bewildered by Jesus' designation but he saw how Peter would grow into his role.

Once Peter had identified Jesus for who he was, Jesus was able to mould Peter into who he would become. We place less emphasis on character formation in discipleship than we ought to. This is partly because the surrounding culture is much more interested in personality than character, in being lively, out-spoken and witty rather than patient, gentle and faithful, for instance. Our goal is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, which places a priority on character.

We often assume that character is enduring, like the default setting of a gadget, but it is continually evolving over a life-time, for better or for worse. It is shaped by relationships, experience, environment, health and the media we pay attention to. For Christians it is pre-eminently shaped by the Holy Spirit, who seeks to transform us spiritually. Without this commitment, the likelihood is we will be conformed to what lies around us in life. This is why our indolent stereotyping of others will not do, for we never quite have a fix on someone else; they are usually capable of surprising us.

The key to the transformation of Peter was the profound encouragement Jesus offered him. He showed Peter what God saw in him and dared him to live up to it. We are woefully short on encouragement in life. Competition is valued over co-operation in too many spheres; people are reluctant to offer praise because it is

too effusive; they are suspicious when they receive it too, assuming there must be an ulterior motive. Our consumerist tendencies mean we keep people on their toes; they are never quite sure if they are good enough. No wonder so many people feel insecure today.

Despite our instinct to judge others quickly and not subsequently change that judgment, many of us have experienced epiphanies in life. The woman you fall for after a long time; the man you suddenly see as a friend; the child who gives a glimmer of what they will become. Today we are preoccupied with re-branding and make-overs; superficial attempts to change the way others view us or the things we make. A more profound task is the naming of others in a way which releases them to be the person God has called them to be.

This is the creative task God is asking of all those who owe their faith to the rock on which the Church was built.

We can release and empower someone with just a word. Who will we set free this week?