

9:30 in the morning and the car park and cafe at the Windmill are bustling. A enormous 4 X 4 arrived and an elegant woman in new running gear got out, locked the car and began to run, carefully picking her way avoiding the puddles and mud. At the same time, breathless on her bike, there arrived another woman, also about to go for a run. She watched the first runner begin and she thought to herself, thank goodness I am not like her, polluting the environment with my big car and obsessed with what I look like. The first lady thinking, if I get fit and lose some weight, perhaps I can feel better and be a better mother.

How we love to judge others. We may all do it in different ways, according to our particular prejudices, but we all do it.

Impartiality is very hard. When I used to teach, for a very brief while I had my daughter in my class. She complained bitterly that I was tougher on her than anyone else and it was probably true. I didn't want to be seen to be giving her any favours.

However hard we try, we do not treat everyone equally. We find some people more likeable than others. Research has shown that we make our mind up about people within 30 seconds of meeting them – so first impressions are particularly important during interviews. Of course we can change our mind, but body language, voice, shape of head, all of these subtly influence us. And that is before we start thinking about the labels we attach to people - their trade or profession, their education. Before we know anything about a person we judge, and when we judge, whoever it is we are judging and whatever they have done, we become like the Pharisee, setting ourselves up as in some way superior, and by that simple act, putting ourselves in God's role.

God is judge. For God is impartial.

You will often hear it said that God has a preference for the poor. The writer of Ecclesiasticus would not agree. But God is just. So being poor is not an excuse for violence or thieving. But enjoying riches at the expense of others, that is unjust and God cares about that. God does not cease to love someone just because they are rich, but if you have all of the advantages that wealth brings, then inevitably, what you are expected to achieve will be greater.

If we are to avoid being judgemental, perhaps what we need to do is examine our prejudices. As we go about our daily business and pass people in the street, or read stories in the papers, or watch things on television, who are the people that might make us think, I'm glad I'm not like him or her.

It is quite probable that the things which we look down upon are quite superficial. They have nothing to do with whether one is a good person, who is generous, kind and loving. In any case, it is not other people that we need to change. We can only change ourselves. It is salutary to think about the things which tempt us. I am not really talking about what we might regard as the big sins, but the little things. Are we tempted to appear better than we really are? Mind you, getting lured into a discussion about a book you have not actually read can lead to some embarrassment. Do we want to appear as though we are better connected than we really are? Of course some people really do know everyone. I am reminded of Norman St John Stevas. As someone said to him: "The trouble with you, Norman, is that you're such a compulsive name dropper." Quick as a flash came the rejoinder: "The Queen said exactly the same to me yesterday. "

Perhaps we want to appear more generous than we actually are? Or maybe we simply want to be liked?

That is the most dangerous of all the temptations, because it masquerades as a virtue.

How much goes unchallenged, because we want to be liked? How often do we attempt to fit in, even when it involves spending money that could well be put to a better purpose? How often do we avoid conflict? How often do we avoid talking about our faith, or the teaching of Jesus in case it makes other people think we are a bit odd? How often do we miss opportunities to do something worthwhile?

What would need to change for us to be able to say, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'

I could be very wrong, but I have a feeling that St Paul was not a warm and cuddly man. Not immediately likeable. He was not worried about whether people liked him. He was not worried about anything apart from getting the message of Christ's love across to other people. This was his entire focus.

If the idea of being like that scares you, or even appals you, you are not alone.

We are not all, maybe not any of us, called to be like Paul. But we are called to know our limitations. We are called to work on those areas where we fall such a long way short of the ideal. We are not impartial, but we can try to be. We are not perfect, but we can ask for forgiveness.

God is just.

He knows our limitations, and he knows that time and time again we will get it wrong. What he asks of us, is that we learn from this, that we begin to understand the things that we get so very wrong, and attempt to avoid them.

When my son was a little boy, I warned him not to touch the sewing machine. I went out of the room and there was a loud wail. He had managed to sew right through his thumb nail. He never did it again. But we are protected by God's love and by the love of our friends and family from many of our mistakes. So when we fail to do what we should, there may be no immediate pain for us. The pain may be felt far away by people we do not even know. And the pain is felt too by God.

Our task is to see that pain, know our part in it, and like the publican beg for mercy that we may learn and become a little bit closer to being able to say 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.'