

2023-02-22 ... 7.30pm Ash Wednesday Service Talk ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Joel 2: 2; Cor 5; John 8

At Margaret Marshall's funeral her sons chose to highlight in their eulogy that she had taught them **'to never judge anyone because you don't know what they have been through'**. Rob added, **'And she was right'**. He is a former police officer and I wondered whether there was a particular incident when he had learnt this for himself.

Jesus didn't watch the scribes and Pharisees as they reflected on their own sins, didn't hold them to account or record the order in which they slipped away. Nor did he condemn the woman for the past but told her to start afresh.

I think gathered here this evening, as we look around at our grey hairs, we should take note that it was the elders who realised first that they shouldn't be calling the kettle black.

Margaret had learnt from Jesus's example.

I wonder whether we feel we should apply a higher standard to ourselves as church going Christians and whether, if we do, we are right to do so? It is certainly a criticism others sometimes throw our way when we fall short – she's not good, why does she go to church?

The other day I watched Chris Packham's new programme 'Inside Our Autistic Mind' and I was greatly moved by the story of a young woman who wanted to reveal to her Mum how she was when she unmasked herself – she said she had learnt to mask her difference when she was only about 5, she had only ever let her husband see how her body responded to the exhaustion of having to pretend and only let herself be with him without trying to conform to the norms of social contact. What she was anxious about was that her Mum would be upset that she had masked before her, in a way lied to her, for so long. But she wanted to change that, to be herself with others, and first of all with her Mum.

In a slightly different way, I would guess that we all mask ourselves in some ways before each other. Perhaps especially within our church community – whilst in some ways we are brought together in a certain intimacy and know something of each other's cares and fears, there is perhaps a desire to show only our good sides. We are Christians, we are supposed to be good.

What we remind ourselves each Lent, as we focus on the calls to repent and the reassurances of God's mercy which follow them, is that before God, before Jesus, before the Holy Spirit, there is no hiding, no disguising. We are truly known. And that is a great comfort, a great relief because we do not have to pretend. Through Lent we are encouraged to face up to ourselves, the good, the bad and all the shades of grey in between, and having done that, worked at that, when we then hear again at Easter how Jesus became sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God, we will surely know that not only are we truly known, we are truly loved.

In that understanding, I pray that we might then be able to accept God's forgiveness, and have the courage and confidence to live in the light of God and not in Joel's 'locust cloud of darkness and gloom.'