

St Mary's, Stoke D'Abernon; 8 a.m. service

13 May 2018 (Seventh Sunday of Easter) (Sunday after Ascension Day)

Acts 1:15-17; John 17:6-19; 1 John 5:9-13.

Christ's eyes

Let me ask you a question.

When you look at yourself, whose eyes do you use?

I think it's fair to say that we all have an image of ourselves, and that image has a real influence on how we behave, since we generally try and live up to it – whether for good, or for bad!

But where does that image come from? Well, we aren't born with it – it comes from our experience of the world.

The first eyes we view ourselves through are usually those of our parents. If our parent's eyes reflect back an image of something precious, then our self-image is bound to be a healthy one. I once read an interview with a man who said that when his daughter was born, he resolved that every time she came into the room he would make his eyes light up. What a fortunate child she was. But if our parents' eyes looked on us with coldness or anger or rejection, then the image of ourselves that we hold inside is likely be one of worthlessness.

Then as we grow older, we start to use the eyes of the people around us to see who we are.

As the mother of a young girl, I worry about what eyes our young women look through to see themselves. Especially with the dreadful rise of online pornography, I worry that they will start to see themselves as sexual objects, and think their value lies in degrading themselves.

When we start our working lives, we start to look at ourselves through the eyes of the world. If we look through those eyes and see promotion, money, success, then we see value in ourselves. And when we don't have these things, we look through the eyes of the world and see failure.

Given that our self-image has such a profound influence on us, it seems to me that one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves is this: *whose*

eyes am I looking through when I see myself? Do those eyes see me as I really am, or do they see me in some distorted way?

If we want to live a fulfilled life, we had better get a true picture of ourselves, and that means that the eyes we use must be the clearest, purest, wisest eyes possible.

And what purer, truer, wiser eyes could there be than the eyes of Christ?

Probably the most important question you can ask yourself is this: *what do you think Christ sees when he looks at you?*

Well, I think I can answer that – all we have to do is to look at this morning's gospel reading to discover how Jesus sees us.

In our reading, Jesus is preparing for his coming crucifixion, and he is praying to the Father to protect his disciples. In the process, he describes how he sees his disciples. These words don't just apply to the original twelve – they apply to all followers of Jesus, including everyone here this morning. It's a wonderful thing to think that in his words uttered 2,000 years ago, Jesus is describing how he sees you and me today.

So what do we see about ourselves when we look through the eyes of Jesus?

The first thing we see is that we are God's gift to Jesus. Jesus says that we belonged to God, and God gave us to Jesus (17:6). Think about that for a second. Firstly, God knew from the beginning of time that we, sitting right here now, would be open to the truth, and accept it, and that made us so precious as to be worthy of being a gift from God to his Son.

The next thing we see is that we are enlightened. Jesus said, 'I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them' (17:8). We are in possession of the truth about the universe.

And then we are told this: we bring glory to Jesus. 'And glory has come to me through them,' he says (17:10b). We ordinary people, with our weaknesses and failures – we bring glory to Jesus! Knowing that, how can we ever look at our lives and think we are failures?

Next, Jesus tells us that we are capable of loving each other to the same degree of perfection that he and the Father love each other. 'Protect them,' says Jesus, 'so that they may be one as we are one.' (17:11b). Sometimes churches can be damaging places, because they are full of broken people, and we can hurt one another terribly.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus believes that it is within our power to love those people sitting in the pew next to us, and in the church down the street, with the same, self-sacrificing love that exists between the Father and him.

It reminds me of a story I heard.

A priest was giving a sermon about the cross of Jesus and he ended it by saying: 'And we must all follow the example of Jesus and embrace our cross.' At which, a woman turned and embraced her husband.

We are indeed each other's crosses. It may seem that some differences cannot be overcome. But Jesus says they can! So let us trust him in this, and love each other.

What next?

Well, we are different. Jesus says that, like him, we are not of this world. This means that we are likely to experience criticism, scorn and, in many parts of the world, persecution. Jesus says that the world will hate us (17:14). It is for this reason that Jesus prays to the Father to protect us (17:17), and we must therefore not be afraid of being different, of having different values.

And finally, we have a purpose, a mission, which is to go out into the world and proclaim the truth that we have accepted. What's more, we are sanctified for our mission: in other words, we are set aside and marked out for a holy purpose. Did you know that? Did you know that you are set apart for a holy purpose? What does that do to your self-image?

Now, I don't know about you, but as I read these words of Christ and see myself as he sees me, it is almost too much. I feel like something with a hard outer shell that just can't expand enough to allow in so much goodness. And yet, here we are, gifts of God, glorifiers of Christ, vehicles of perfect love, marked out from before the beginning of time to be the holy bearers of a special mission to proclaim God's truth.

How foolish we are, then, to see ourselves through any other pair of eyes. How foolish we are to accept any image of ourselves that says we are worthless or ugly or a failure. If we fail to accept Christ's image of us, what a terrible loss we endure. What lives we could be leading if only we accepted the truth about ourselves! And so I close with this prayer:

Loving Father. Please help us to believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how beautiful it may be.

Amen.