

Have An Awareness of Those Around You

Luke 6.27-36

I'm continuing on my sermons about the four pillars. There's a prize for whoever can name all four pillars for me....

I spoke last time about how having peace with our inner self is a challenge, because at a certain time in our development, we become aware of how others view us, and that this can make us very self-conscious.

Well, our awareness of others develops in a similar way. At first, as a new-born baby we don't even know there are others. In fact, we don't even realise fully that there even is an 'us'. All we know is the world and everything we experience. Our whole world is feeling hungry, feeling fed, feeling uncomfortable or tired, or feeling peaceful and happy, feeling cold or feeling warm. And everything we see is looked at with wonder and without any fear because we are not separate from the world. At some point in those first few months, we learn that we are separate from the world, and we can experience the fear of things that are not us for the first time. Babies go through this stage clearly, when they go

from staring and smiling at any old stranger who comes up to them, to then becoming shy all of a sudden when they see strangers, or as often happens to me, crying when they see someone they don't know. Mr Lindsay will tell you, a sure way to get his baby, Indy, to cry is to let her see me.

Eventually, at around age 2, children will see other people as objects that can either get them what they want or get in their way. These are often called the terrible twos, because children will often rage and have tantrums at this stage if they don't get what they want. They are aware of other people, but only as objects - only as figures in their life that they need to manipulate to get their needs met.

Unfortunately, some people never grow beyond this level of relating to others. But that is rare. It would make you a psychopath to never see people as anything else but objects for you to manipulate.

Eventually we must come to the realisation that people are the centre of their own universe; that just like us, they have their own hopes and dreams, their own feelings and fears and challenges. And that just as they are an actor who

temporary appears on the stage of our life, we to them are also just an actor who for short periods appears in scenes of their life, but we are not central and maybe not even a very significant presence in their life.

When we can start to understand this about people, then we are finally in a place where we can begin to develop empathy – the awareness that others are just like us, and that they feel emotions as deeply and truly as we do, so to intentionally cause another person pain would be wrong.

This is probably the most important thing for you all to learn at this stage of your lives. Most of you are just learning this now or trying to learn it. I remember a particularly vivid lesson I had in having an awareness of those around you.

I lost a school sock one day. I had three pairs of school socks, so that there was time for my mother to wash them after I'd worn them once. And Mum did washing every day, and then it could take up to another day for them to dry, so I always had a clean pair in my drawers ready to go each morning. So when I lost a school sock it was kind of a big deal. That and the fact that school socks are really expensive meant that

mum had what you boys would call a fat rage. And there was no law against smacking your kids in those days. We got hit all the time. I think my mum actually kind of enjoyed it. Sometimes she would hit us for no reason, and if I asked her why she did it, she'd say "don't argue with me." Anyway, I'll save that for therapy. The point is, I was terrified of my mother, so when she said "you better find that sock, or else" I was pretty determined to find my sock.

Now being a typical teenage boy, my first instinct was to blame others. I had lost my sock after a PE lesson. When we went back into the changing rooms to get back into our uniforms was when I realised my sock was missing. And so I assumed that someone had stolen it. So after looking in the lost property at school, and searching my locker and all of the classrooms I had visited that day, I decided that since someone had probably stolen my sock in the first place, it was probably OK to steal one back from someone else. And of course, the easiest way to do this was going to be to take it from the changing rooms during PE, the same as I assumed had happened to me.

I remember looking around the changing room and trying to find the least threatening person I could steal a sock from.

There was a boy who was very uncool, who was just about to get in the shower, so as soon as he stepped in, I swiped his sock and then left. Mum was very pleased when I got home and told her I had found my lost sock.

But the next day at school, I saw this kid straight away, because he stuck out like a sore thumb. Instead of wearing black school socks, he was wearing white sports socks with his school shoes. When he walked into class he had to show a teacher a note from home to explain why he wasn't wearing his school uniform. I felt so bad. Even worse, he wore these white socks for the rest of the week. When questioned about why he hadn't got new school socks yet by a teacher, he said that his mum didn't have the money yet. This kid had only ever had one pair of school socks for the whole time he was at school. His mum couldn't afford to buy him any more than that. And when I stole his sock, his mum had to save up to buy him a new pair. I'd had three pairs of socks. And my parents could afford to buy me another pair, Mum just didn't want to spend money she didn't have to.

All I had been aware of was me and my need to get my mother off my back. I had been completely unaware of the boy who I stole the sock from and gave no thought to how it would affect his life. I had just assumed that losing a sock would be no big deal for most people. I had no idea that I had stolen something from someone who needed it a lot more than I did.

Unfortunately, I probably also made this kid think he was going crazy, because I felt so bad about taking his sock, that the next week, during PE again, I snuck his sock back into his bag when he was having a shower. He must have thought he was going insane when he had been unable to find his sock in his bag all week and then all of a sudden it just reappeared in his bag. I can just imagine his mum yelling at him: “So you’re telling me someone stole a sock from your bag, and then a week later it just magically reappears in it again?”

So, this was a good lesson for me in empathy. It taught me that you really never know what another person is going through, or what their life is like. And that someone could have a much more difficult life than you realise, so you

should always treat people with kindness and gentleness, in case you add to their suffering in life.

I am constantly surprised by my dealings with boys who get into conflicts here at school. One person will come and complain that someone is calling him names and being mean to him. When I talk to the boy who is name calling and ask him why he's doing it he tells me that the other boy was calling him a dick. So I go back to the original boy and ask him if that's true and he will say something like: "Yeah, so? But he is a dick!" It's amazing how hard it can be for some of you to realise that when you treat other people badly, they are going to treat you badly back.

Jesus didn't give a lot of rules to live by, in fact some people would say he actually only ever gave one and that was: Do to others what you would want them do to you. It's called the Golden Rule. It is what it means to practise empathy. When we realise that other people are the same as us, we treat them the way we would want to be treated. And if we all practised this, what a different world we would live in. There would be no bullying, no fights, no War in Ukraine, no need for a social welfare system.

So that is the second pillar: Have an awareness of others.

When we are aware that others are just like us, a person who feels as we do, and who suffers as we do, then we will treat them as we would like to be treated. And that is the start of being a Good Rathkeale Man.