

# Along the track

## At First Glance

*Like it or not, at first instance you are being judged by how you look, how you dress, and how you carry yourself—and, later if you're lucky, how you do your job.*

I read that piece of wisdom in an international business magazine. Sadly that may well be true. We live in an age where image has become all-important. A culture of celebrity pervades much of our media. Who we really are is often masked by appearances, by what is considered to be 'cool' (or not), by what we wear, by the labels people choose to put on us. We can be judged by the masks we choose to hide behind, and all of us do! Many times, when we see or hear someone saying or doing something unusual, 'outside the norm' as it were, our first reaction is to make judgments, we jump to conclusions and rashly judge people by outward appearances. We've all done it. You know – 'they could lose some weight', 'how could they dress like that?', 'does he/she ever stop talking', 'they must be....', 'how could anyone possibly think that?' 'what on earth are they doing that for?' But things aren't always what they seem to be. First impressions can be misleading.

My family and I moved to Townsville in early January twenty or so years ago. To say the least, it was hot! And humid! A few days later, on one of my first days working in the Catholic Education Office there, we had our opening liturgy to begin the year. On my way to the meeting room I spoke to an old chap in the garden – we chatted about the weather and I asked him what flowers were growing in the plot beside us. "I don't know", he said. "Aren't you the gardener?" I asked. "No, I'm the Bishop". It was my first meeting with quite an extraordinary man, thoughtful, kind, encouraging, a true and holy pastor with a very generous spirit. He just didn't look like a bishop!

Sometimes lasting and fruitful lessons can come from the unexpected – the unlikely people who cross our paths, the chance encounters with people who initially we may have 'written off' at first glance. They didn't measure up, or they may have looked different, or they just 'weren't our type'. But, for some reason or other, perhaps when we have stepped out of our comfort zone, we have met and talked and our lives have been enriched. Leaving our comfort zone and reaching out to others can bring the gift of being challenged by fresh views and educated by listening to different perspectives. Sometimes they have taught us a lot about ourselves. We count ourselves blessed because we know them. But it takes an effort, a decision, courage even. Not making judgements is hard!

Often the easy path is to be judgmental and close-minded, to write people off at a glance. They don't fit the norm, they don't fit in to our expectations. They are not 'one of us'. That says more about us than we

realise! Judging at first glance can be very shallow, it can demonstrate a lack of sympathy, an intolerance of those who may be 'different'. We might not like to admit it, but it can mean we think we are, in some way better than others.

James the Apostle puts it in typical graphic fashion: My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judging by wrong standards? James 2:1-5

It is hard not to judge by 'wrong standards', especially when we don't see them as wrong. Making judgments can be a statement about our own insecurity – someone's outside-our-norm of behaviour can challenge our beliefs, our accepted way of doing things. Sometimes we need to take stock - we can tend to be pessimistic in our judgments, in other words thinking the worst of others rather than being optimistic, thinking well of them instead of immediately ascribing negative values or beliefs or motives. When we make judgements, what does it say about what we believe?

It can also be a symptom of a closed mind. When we meet others who are perhaps 'not one of us', it is also important to appreciate where they are coming from, what may motivate them, what their perspective may be, something of their history, their life experiences, their beliefs. Of course that can't be done at first glance, but an open mind and heart can go a long way! Being open and respectful of different backgrounds, cultures and beliefs can be very liberating and enriching. It can renew our faith in humanity.

So if we find ourselves judging at first glance, it is time to take stock. Then perhaps we may discover that in reality I am the one who is missing out! Secondly, if others can overlook how I appear at first glance and see who I am for all my flaws and faults, prejudices and misgivings, but rather see who I am and what I have to give, then it may be time for me to do unto others.....

*For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).*

Regards  
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