

They say appearances can be deceptive. I would go on to say that our perceptions of people and situations can be deceptive. I often think back to my Lower Sixth class in Birmingham in 1966. One morning at registration our Form Master that a new boy was joining our class – the new boy was Indian, he wore a turban and he had a beard.

Many of the reactions were hostile – ‘Why should he be allowed to have a beard and we can’t? I’m becoming a Sikh!’ The reactions were based not on Lakbir as a person but on our perceptions of what Indians were like – devious, lazy. We were told not to treat him as an Indian but as an individual.

We soon learned that Lakbir worked a darn sight harder than we did, was a delightful person of great integrity who rapidly became part of our group. That has always served as an example to me of the distance between our preconceived ideas and reality.

I remember another man calling to me at the Rectory in Finglas with all the appearances and demeanour of a gentleman. He seemed to know several of the clergy in Dublin, wore a nice suit, spoke well – I subsequently discovered that he was a con man. Of course we often judge people by our experiences of them but very often our judgements are coloured by preconceived ideas.

Outward appearances on which we set great store, on which we often base our judgements, can be so deceptive. We look at someone and we see an Indian, a Protestant, working class, upper class – and we leave it at that. We don’t trouble ourselves to see the person behind the image we have of them.

This is one of the features that runs through our Old Testament Lesson this morning from the First Book of Samuel, that tells of the choice of David to replace Saul as King of Israel. It is a story of two perceptions – man's perception and God's perception.

Samuel experiences God's command to go and anoint one from among the sons of Jesse as a successor to Saul. Saul had failed in the task to which God had called him. As I often remark, God chooses to work through people – but man's failure can never ultimately frustrate God's purposes. God will raise up other individuals to do his work.

Despite his misgivings about the whole trip – he was aware that a jealous King Saul would not view kindly anyone anointing a rival to his throne – Samuel arrives at the home of Jesse in Bethlehem. In the context of worship, the offering of sacrifice, Samuel sees the sons of Jesse.

It is at this point we come to the kernel of the story. Both God and Samuel are looking for a king from among Jesse's sons. Samuel comes to the task with a human agenda. He is looking for someone who LOOKS the part – God seeks someone who IS the part. When the oldest is brought before Samuel, he thinks 'That's the one' but he is aware of God's warning voice in his heart; 'Man looks at the outside – I look at the heart' and so on for seven of Jesse's eight sons.

There was another son David. Jesse had obviously not thought it worth bringing David along to this gathering at all. He was the youngest, a child – they were about men's business.

When David is at last brought it, Samuel is now convinced that David is the future King that God is seeking and he anoints him as a sign that he has been set apart for great things. God, for his part, we are told, empowers him with his Spirit.

In the anointing of David we have a coming together of man's actions and God's purposes. David was no plaster cast saint but his reign marked a golden era in the history of the Jewish people. It was under his reign that Jerusalem was established as the capital of Israel and Israel's influence was to be at its height. It was from the house of David that God's Messiah was expected.

His son Solomon managed to hold things together but, after his death, the Kingdom of Israel split into the two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah that David had brought together. There followed a period of progressive decline as man's purposes and God's purposes again parted. They still saw themselves as God's people. They went through the motions of seeking God's will.

At the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, we read of God declaring punishment for those who went against him for three and four generations and steadfast love for those who obeyed him. In other words a society that goes with God prospers; a society that goes against God can go into serious decline.

I actually think that it is not really a matter of God directly inflicting punishment, as a society bringing all that down upon itself.

As I said earlier, in the episode we read of this morning, we had a coming together of God's purposes and man's purposes. Samuel sought and listened to God and his people enjoyed a Golden Age in their history. David's successors kept the externals of religion but in their hearts drifted away and the community declined. Each generation needs to seek in its own time and circumstances a similar convergence between God's purposes and ours, a seeking of God not just in form but in substance. In that lies our peace. May God give us the grace to seek it.