

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year B: Is 35:4-7a; Ps 146; Jas 2:1-5; Mk 7:31-37
September 5, 2021
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One of the clear messages for us from the Scriptures for this Sunday's Mass is the warning not to judge by appearances. This is something that we all know is dangerous to do, but, for some reason, we always need to be reminded about it, and maybe even convince ourselves not to do it.

In the second reading, from the letter of St. James, we are told, "*[S]how no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Sit here, please,' while you say to the poor one, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs?*" St. James is telling us that our Christian faith requires us to not to be shallow and superficial and not to judge others by appearance. Sacred Scripture reminds us that, while we often see only external appearances, we should try to be more like God, who sees the heart (cf. 1Sam 16:7).

It seems to be one of the effects in our fallen nature, though, that we often tend to judge by appearances. We get caught up and stuck on appearances, both of others and of ourselves. Most people try to teach their children that one of the signs of maturity is the ability to look past external appearances and to value the internal, moral qualities of a person, which are more lasting than the visible, physical qualities which are only temporary. We try to remind our young people, and ourselves, that moral qualities, such as loyalty and honesty and humility and generosity, are more important than external, physical qualities, especially when choosing a spouse for life.

But, it should be more than our desire to be mature – it should also be our faith in Christ, which motivates us not to judge by appearances. In the Gospel passage for today's Mass, Jesus meets a deaf man with a speech impediment. Often, people are nervous and hesitate to interact or engage with people who have disabilities. But not Christ. He seemed to be drawn to such people, always looking past the disability and into their souls. Everything Christ did and said – the way He always treated people – taught us not to judge by appearances. And so, our faith in Him should be what motivates us to value interior, moral qualities more than exterior, physical qualities.

One thing that we priests sometimes hear is that some people are afraid to come to Mass, for fear of being judged. They tell us they fear other people at Mass will think they don't fit in. They fear that they will be judged by their appearance as someone who doesn't belong at Mass. This is painful to hear, because most people who come to Mass and try to be faithful to Christ would probably be on guard against making such judgments. Nevertheless, this is something that all of us should be aware of and strive to prevent.

It's part of our Christian faith, not only to avoid judging by appearance, but to avoid judging others at all. "*Stop judging,*" Christ said, "*that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you*" (Mt 7:1-2). Jesus warns us about judging others, and this can be tricky, because we're supposed to make judgments about what's right and wrong. Parents, for example, are supposed to teach their children how to live and to avoid what's morally wrong, just as priests are supposed to warn their people about what leads to sin. We all have to make many judgments in life about what's right and wrong, or else we would be lost, and probably immoral. And yet, we are not allowed to judge others on the status of their soul, because that authority belongs only to God.

One of the dangers for those who strive to be faithful to Christ is making rash judgments about others. We have no right to do that, because we don't have all the information about another person's life. Only God knows everything, because He sees the heart, and so only God has the right and authority to make a judgment about another life. Our part is to strive to be faithful and to encourage others to do the same, so that we all will have nothing to fear when we finally meet Christ, the Just Judge.