



Perception

1 Kings 22:1-28

EYES

A question of perspective. I want you to have a look at these eyes. They are staring a bit. What do you think the owner of these eyes is like? Nice? Evil?

POSTER

Well, these eyes are part of a West Midlands crime prevention campaign a few years ago. In fact, they are meant to be the eyes of the law – the police. They are supposed to be the good guys. But do the staring eyes convey that? It's a matter of perspective, how it appears to us.

TITLE

Often how we judge people or circumstances is on how things appear to us. Usually that's shaped by our attitudes. Attitudes in turn are usually shaped by experience through life, often right from childhood. It may be our parents, the people we associate with, good and bad experiences in life. But our attitude will affect the perspective by which we treat other people and ourselves.

Let me give you some examples to see how they might work for you. What political party do you vote for? What political party did your parents vote for? Is it the same? It often is. Our upbringing shapes now.

Then there are perceptions of what a Pastor should be like in church. What we think a Pastor should be like is usually shaped by our past experience of pastors. When a new one comes along that's quite different, it can either be a positive experience or something very negative because we assess the new person through the eyes of past experience.

Or there's people's experience of Christians or church. We often hear interesting descriptions from unbelievers don't we?. Christians. Hypocrites, insincere, shallow, killjoys, judgemental, anti-everything. Church. Boring, out of touch, load of rubbish. Where do they get these ideas from? From bad experiences of Christians or church they've had in the past – or what other people who have influenced them have said, whether or not it's true! Maybe just their upbringing.

Very often, people's perception of Church or Christians of for that matter politics and general attitude to life isn't based on cool analysis of the facts: quite the reverse it's shaped by past experiences, the prejudices of others we have been associated with and what we want for ourselves now. That applies to each of us.

The biggest problems arise when something or someone challenges how we see life. How do we react? How do we react to change when what we are facing is new and unfamiliar?

Let me give you to an example and hopefully you'll see what I mean:

PICTURE OF BUILDING

What do our neighbours think of us? We have kind of asked them a few things about ourselves before in a survey in 2004. Most people know a church is here but we've not recently actually asked them what they think of us. Does it matter what they think? Often the main impression they have of the church comes from this aspect of the church. Some have met us from time to time in outreach events and door to door work. Some

people have a positive view. Others negative. Most people probably none at all if the previous survey is anything to go by.

HITCHIKERS

I don't know if you ever listened to or watched the Hitch-hikers Guide to the Galaxy. The description of Earth by the guidebook was "mostly harmless". I hate to say this but I suspect that's the view of this neighbourhood despite of us being more active in the community in the last few years.

But what do we think of ourselves as a church?

You can see that this is very important for our reaching out as a church to our community both from the point of view of us understanding our community and for understanding ourselves as we reach out to them.

In a couple of weeks we're going to have a report presented to us on what we're like as a church. Come along as I think you'll find it interesting listening – and reading if you want a copy of it!

TITLE

I thought I'd spend this week and next exploring how we should deal with our own perceptions of church and how we should deal with other's perceptions of us. Why this is important is that if our perception of ourselves is wrong and others is wrong, then we may find sharing Jesus with our community will not work – we won't connect. So let's have a look at the Word of God and see what we can find.

TWO KINGS AND TWO PROPHETS

To illustrate this we're going to look at this story in 1 Kings 22 this morning.

We're going to look specifically at two pairs of people. Firstly the kings Ahab and Jehoshaphat and then the prophet's Zedekiah and Micaiah. Because their perceptions of God were very different and the consequences of each were quite different too,

If you are not familiar with the background to this, let me fill you in.

MAP

By this time (836BC) Israel was separated into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The temple was situated in Judah's territory so Israel started to worship God in their own centres – this was against what God had commanded. However most Israelite kings also worshipped the gods of the nations around them – sometimes instead of God, sometimes as well as – hedging their bets!

TWO KINGS AND TWO PROPHETS

Ahab was one such king – widely regarded as being just about the most evil of all. He worshipped God in theory but promoted the worship of foreign gods such as Baal and Asherah. Those prophets like Elijah who stood against him he suppressed. The kings of Judah were often much the same but occasionally there was a good guy who got rid of pagan gods and re-established the true worship and Jehoshaphat fell into this category. As a result there was often tension between the two nations.

In 836BC things were bad for Ahab as he had lost territory to Aram/Syria. They were at peace but he wanted it back and needed help. His plan was to try and capture Ramoth Gilead but he needed help and got Jehoshaphat involved. You couldn't get two different guys, Ahab the evil king and Jehoshaphat, the godly king.

What made the difference between them?

A God Perspective

Ahab was up for it but Jehoshaphat said "let's consult the LORD. Ahab brings in 400 prophets who said consult the LORD. "The Lord will give you victory." Yeah right – 400 prophets saying the same thing. No surprise that they said what Ahab wanted. They needed to stay alive! It didn't fool the spiritual man. He had a God perspective and saw through it all.

I believe God wants us all to be people with a God perspective. He wants us to see things with His eyes and assess things as the Spirit moves us. If our faith is to make a difference in our lives and in our community, it starts with learning to have a God perspective and being like Jehoshaphat, not jumping too quickly unless we are sure we are acting according to the Spirit.

An open mind

400 prophets giving exactly the same line. Jehoshaphat smelt a rat. Is there another prophet available? *"There is one more, Micaiah son of Imlah. But I hate him because he never prophesies anything good for me; it's always something bad."* *"You shouldn't say that!" Jehoshaphat replied. 9 Then Ahab called in a court official and told him to go and get Micaiah at once.* Jehoshaphat had enough sense to know that he needed the full picture to get a God perspective.

Ahab had a different perspective. He had reduced prophets of the Lord down to the 400 who always said what suited. He wasn't prepared to tackle the issue of his sin or the injustice he held his people in. Elijah was out of the frame in this story. The only other prophet was Micaiah and we think he was in jail at this point because in the Hebrew, Ahab commands Micaiah is "taken back" to prison in the closing verses.

What was wrong with Micaiah. He always spoke truth however inconvenient the truth was. He told it to Ahab as it was as far as God was concerned. Ahab rejected him, preferring to go with the majority who were all yes me and told him what he wanted to hear.

He was in a state of denial. Faced with the truth, he leaned on his yes men prophets – people who had already been deceived and were deceiving him.

The most important thing for us to do as we reach out is to have an open mind as to what God wants to do in His church. We often so want our way don't we? We hear the word of God week in week out as individuals and as a church. Maybe you already know of something in your life God is challenging you about. Maybe it's about a broken relationships He wants us to mend, maybe it's someone who you needs forgiveness, maybe its an issue that you know you should have just placed in His hands.

Maybe you are eaten up with doubt. Maybe you are facing change in the church which you find difficult to cope with. Sometimes it's easy to live in denial of such challenge.

The Holy Spirit wants to open our minds this morning to the things we need to deal with in our lives to start seeing things with an open mind – as God sees them and then putting Him first.

That was our first pair, but the second pair is even more significant.

ZEDEKIAH VERSUS MICAIAH

This was also the battle of the prophets. It was a the battle of the one true prophet Micaiah versus the 400 let by Zedekiah. Ahab was trying to argue here that 400 people couldn't be wrong. But they were because they had been deluded.

Beware Deception

In verse 19 onwards we read: *"Now listen to what the LORD says! I saw the LORD sitting on his throne in heaven, with all his angels standing beside him. 20 The LORD asked, 'Who will deceive Ahab so that he will go and be killed at Ramoth?' Some of the angels said one thing, and others said something else, 21 until a spirit stepped forward, approached the LORD, and said, 'I will deceive him.' 22 'How?' the LORD asked. The spirit replied, 'I will go and make all of Ahab's prophets tell lies.' The LORD said, 'Go and deceive him. You will succeed.'" 23 And Micaiah concluded: "This is what has happened. The LORD has made these prophets of yours lie to you. But he himself has decreed that you will meet with disaster!"*

Someone once described this passage as one of the most puzzling in Scripture as it sounds as though God is commissioning one of the host of heaven to deceive Ahab. Never avoid difficult passages of scripture because as you get to grips with them, you find it releases important truth.

God is righteous and true, so how could he send a lying spirit to deceive Ahab? We need to know other parts of the Bible to help us understand what is being said here. Micaiah is actually relating the content of a vision. We don't know how figurative or literal it is but it bears strong resemblance to other ideas we find in scripture. I haven't got time to give you any detailed stuff this morning so I'll address just this passage.

First of all we know from the book of Job that satan and his demons get access to heaven. He's an expert at lies and lying angels (otherwise referred to as demons) are a characteristic of his activities. Therefore the lying spirit isn't an angel of God but a demon. We also know that the purpose of demons is to spread lies to undo God's work as satan relies on lies to try to destroy the work of God. It's the only power as such he has.

So this vision is a direct challenge by the Lord as to who was going to be the one to deceive Ahab. The lying spirit identifies himself and says how he's going to do it via the prophets. God allows him to do it. This is consistent with say, the example of Job where God allowed someone to be attached.

Why was Ahab allowed to be on the receiving end of a lying spirit. He had come to the end of the line. He had not listened to Micaiah in the past and refused to believe the truth. Now he was going to be faced with 400 prophets spreading a lie and a man who he knew always told the truth and that rejection was going to result in his death.

Before you think that seems a bit unfair, let me remind you of a scripture in the Letter of *1 Cor 10:13 Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.*

Ahab had his way of escape. He had confirmation through Micaiah that his prophets were

all lying. Even at this late stage Ahab had the opportunity to believe Micaiah or listen to the prophets. He listened to the prophets and jailed Micaiah and went to his death at Ramoth as prophesied.

Beware deception. It still happens today. The Enemy is still prowling around wants to fill our minds with stuff that sounds plausible but it's all deception, lies. The Enemy wants to make sure that the community around us thinks the worst of us. That can be through ruining our reputation, or enticing us to ruin our own reputation through gossip and false stories. But there's plenty of ways of escape – all we need to do is listen to the voice of God.

But I'd warn you of something else that the enemy's lies do. It's very easy as the people of God, to take something that is of the Spirit and change it so that it becomes of the flesh. One of the largest dangers if we are blessed of God with a ministry or a gift that's life-changing in other people is to start thinking that it's us doing it, not the holy Spirit. We move from the Spirit to the flesh. Worse, I find that it usually takes a while for people who do this to find out! That was true of Zedekiah who slapped Micaiah for prophesying against Ahab.

The proof of the pudding was in the eating. *26 Then King Ahab ordered one of his officers, "Arrest Micaiah and take him to Amon, the governor of the city, and to Prince Joash. 27 Tell them to throw him in prison and to put him on bread and water until I return safely." 28 "If you return safely," Micaiah exclaimed, "then the LORD has not spoken through me!"*

Whilst Micaiah was in prison eating brown bread, Ahab was brown bread – dead – killed by an arrow through a chink in his armour in battle. Killed by his own sin and disobedience.

Speak the truth

Doing things in the flesh is one of the biggest lies the Enemy wants to spread in our church. He wants us to think that we aren't any good because we don't have enough people and there are not enough people who can do things competently. As we'll find out in a couple of weeks, the Lord uses this fellowship here to do some remarkable ministry. And all the right people are here available to do His work. We just need as His people to have the confidence to realise that it is the Spirit who empowers us.

Last week we celebrated Walton Parish Nursing. The core of the story is that we embarked on this ministry when we didn't have the resources. The Spirit provided them. We decided to expand the ministry when we didn't have any Parish Nurses and only a handful of volunteers. The Spirit brought us the manpower we needed. Praise God!

We are doing His work! Never underestimate what God can do. The Lord is building a great little fellowship here. Don't be deceived. Lean on Him and experience the Spirit's power!

Conclusions

So what can we learn about how we are perceived and how we should perceive ourselves.

Live and Speak the Truth

Micaiah was seen as a troublemaker. He preached an inconvenient truth and Ahab had to live in denial and actively suppress him if he was to do things his way. Micaiah was jailed and Ahab listened to the people who gave him his line.

We speak an inconvenient truth for many people in our modern society. If we want to be salt and light to it we shouldn't water it down, just speak it out. As we'll find out next week, there's a positive way of doing that.

But even if the truth is inconvenient, we should still speak it out. God does not work at our speed – the truth will come out and the truth will make people free.

How do I know that. Because I have...

Have confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit

That's the second part of this message this morning. We need to learn afresh to have confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit. In truth, He's the life-changer, the community-changer, the world-changer. It isn't down to us, so we live and speak the truth and let Him do His work in people's lives.

What shapes our lives? The world or what the Spirit is telling us?

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22:1 There was peace between Israel and Syria for the next two years, 2 but in the third year King Jehoshaphat of Judah went to see King Ahab of Israel. 3 Ahab asked his officials, "Why is it that we have not done anything to get back Ramoth in Gilead from the king of Syria? It belongs to us!"

4 And Ahab asked Jehoshaphat, "Will you go with me to attack Ramoth?" "I am ready when you are," Jehoshaphat answered, "and so are my soldiers and my cavalry. 5 But first let's consult the LORD." 6 So Ahab called in the prophets, about four hundred of them, and asked them, "Should I go and attack Ramoth, or not?" "Attack it," they answered. "The Lord will give you victory." 7

But Jehoshaphat asked, "Isn't there another prophet through whom we can consult the LORD?" 8 Ahab answered, "There is one more, Micaiah son of Imlah. But I hate him because he never prophesies anything good for me; it's always something bad." "You shouldn't say that!" Jehoshaphat replied. 9 Then Ahab called in a court official and told him to go and get Micaiah at once. 10 The two kings, dressed in their royal robes, were sitting on their thrones at the threshing place just outside the gate of Samaria, and all the prophets were prophesying in front of them. 11 One of them, Zedekiah son of Chenaanah, made iron horns and said to Ahab, "This is what the LORD says: "With these you will fight the Syrians and totally defeat them."

12 All the other prophets said the same thing. "March against Ramoth and you will win," they said. "The LORD will give you victory." 13 Meanwhile, the official who had gone to get Micaiah said to him, "All the other prophets have prophesied success for the king, and you had better do the same." 14 But Micaiah answered, "By the living LORD I promise that I will say what he tells me to!"

15 When he appeared before King Ahab, the king asked him, "Micaiah, should King Jehoshaphat and I go and attack Ramoth, or not?" "Attack!" Micaiah answered. "Of course you'll win. The LORD will give you victory." 16 But Ahab replied, "When you speak to me in the name of the LORD, tell the truth! How many times do I have to tell you that?" 17 Micaiah answered, "I can see the army of Israel scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd. And the LORD said, "These men have no leader; let them go home in peace." 18 Ahab said to Jehoshaphat, "Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything

good for me? It's always something bad!"

19 Micaiah went on: "Now listen to what the LORD says! I saw the LORD sitting on his throne in heaven, with all his angels standing beside him. 20 The LORD asked, "Who will deceive Ahab so that he will go and be killed at Ramoth?" Some of the angels said one thing, and others said something else, 21 until a spirit stepped forward, approached the LORD, and said, "I will deceive him." 22 "How?" the LORD asked. The spirit replied, "I will go and make all of Ahab's prophets tell lies." The LORD said, "Go and deceive him. You will succeed." 23 And Micaiah concluded: "This is what has happened. The LORD has made these prophets of yours lie to you. But he himself has decreed that you will meet with disaster!"

24 Then the prophet Zedekiah went up to Micaiah, slapped his face, and asked, "Since when did the LORD's spirit leave me and speak to you?" 25 "You will find out when you go into some back room to hide," Micaiah replied. 26 Then King Ahab ordered one of his officers, "Arrest Micaiah and take him to Amon, the governor of the city, and to Prince Joash. 27 Tell them to throw him in prison and to put him on bread and water until I return safely." 28 "If you return safely," Micaiah exclaimed, "then the LORD has not spoken through me!" And he added, "Listen, everyone, to what I have said!"