Dear All

“Never judge a book by it’s cover”. When was the last time someone said this to you or the last time you reprimanded yourself about an incident or person. Sadly, we are all too quick at times to judge people and situations and end up judging them incorrectly, mainly because we were unable or unwilling to commit the time and the energy in finding out more, and moving beyond the obvious and the ‘cover’. When our children were primary school age and the yearly reports came out, Jane and I would diligently read through them and try and decipher perhaps what wasn’t being said. Unlike in my day when the school reports were very honest, and my parents were frequently informed that I could do better if I spent less time watching those doing sports on the playing field rather than concentrating on the lesson, our children’s teachers were in a new era where only the positives were written and the negatives, if there were any, had to be deciphered. Thankfully with our three children there was never too much deciphering required.

On my phone, when I am trying to switch off, I, like many others, will scroll through YouTube videos and I have come across a power lifter called Anatoly, who doesn’t look like a power lifter and is only about 80kg. He dresses up as the gym cleaner and secretly has videos made as he goes around joining in with power lifters, sometimes twice his size, during their training sessions. He looks and acts like an ordinary man, but his ability to humble some of the largest and strongest men in gyms always puts a smile on my face and reminds me constantly not to judge anyone or anything before delving a lot deeper.

I learnt very early on in my ordination training that I couldn’t judge what I was reading in the bible literally, which helped me enormously; now I know that there are others who do take the words of the bible literally, but I can’t and won’t. The word Bible originates from the Greek term biblia, meaning ‘the books’, and is the same origin of the French word Bibliothèque which means library. So the bible is like a collection of short stories, written by many authors, with a common theme (which in itself is not always easy to follow or see!). It was compiled by many scholars, all male, over roughly 1500 years, and was compiled for a male dominant audience in a world so different from our own. During training I was amazed to find that there are pages of the same book in the bible which not only was written by different authors, but authors who lived centuries apart. Pieces of scripture, which may have only been a paragraph or so long, were deemed to be worthy of being included in the bible, so the original scholars and scribes who formatted the bible, found a place for these words to fit into.

People sometimes find difficulty with scripture, sometimes because it doesn’t refer to the way we live our life or the way the world works now, but more often because they are expecting it to be different to what it actually is. Their expectation of what is included is perhaps based on other people’s experience and knowledge, we can all be swayed by somebody we feel knows what they are talking about, and when it comes to scripture this can be as true as any other aspect of our daily life. Have you ever been sold something because of the salesperson’s rhetoric, only to realise that actually you didn’t need it, or even worse were completely duped.

I like to think of the Bible not as an instruction manual, of how our life should be lived, but rather as a guidebook, telling us the stories behind an all loving and encompassing God and how by following the life of Jesus Christ, our lives will be changed for the better. But just like any guidebook that we perhaps purchase before going on holiday, we will take from it different things than the person we perhaps sit next to on the plane. We might take away from it all the best walks, whilst someone else will take away from it the best restaurants and bars. The bible is the same. We all read the same words, but depending on our previous experiences and what is happening in our life at the time, we will look for and take away different information and ‘advice’ from it.

The words of scripture were written to remember some of the actions and reactions of a God who was trying to make the world a more peaceful place, and some of the actions and reactions of Jesus, a life led to try and make God’s wishes more relevant to us humans.

So whatever cover your bible has, please don’t judge it by others experiences and words, learn to form your own experiences and words, living out your own reaction to what is still the best selling book in the world.

Martin.