

## Labelling and overlooking

Labels are a vital part of life. They help us make quick decisions: for example, if a container has the word 'poison' written in large letters across the front, we know not to touch the contents.

If something says 'gluten-free', that is vital and welcome information for some.

If I'm buying trousers, a label that says 'no ironing needed', that is an immediate sell.

Occasionally, a wrong label can be amusing or embarrassing: A product on display in China: insect repellent / s and the c the wrong way round / incest repellent. But on the whole, labels are pretty useful things.

We also label people: Nothing essentially wrong with that. If you were looking to employ someone and a previous employer said they were a poor time-keeper, that is extremely valuable information.

But there are some dangers attached: Firstly, some labels are simply wrong.

: Michele Obama: \* "not Princeton material" – wrong

**There was a man who was fired from his journalist job at the Kansas City Star because his editor felt he "lacked imagination and had no good ideas." His name was Walt Disney.**

And in today's passage, David is in effect wrongly labelled: his father considers him too young to even invite to the ceremony where the new king of Israel will be revealed. Too young, not a contender.

The second problem with labels applied to people is that labels are snapshots of a moment in time: David was shepherd boy, Saul's loyal servant, courageous fighter, great leader, adulterer, murderer, poet, man of great faith. Those are all snapshots of parts of a journey.

None of us ever stay exactly the same. Even if it's just something like: 'oh, he's got a bit more grumpy in the last year or so', we are none of us static. We are not just human beings, we are human becomings. David was a young boy (the youngest, therefore the least important) in a farming family who became the greatest king of Israel: such that Jesus was often known as the Son of David. Labels are snapshots of moments in time.

The third and final problem is that labels make us lazy: We hear a label, and immediately, lots of assumptions fall into place. And that is very dangerous.

Every time there is a new edition of the Oxford dictionary, a few new words appear. One word that got in about 10 years ago for the first time was 'happy clappy'. A derogatory term. But if someone used that phrase, I want to ask: "Do you mean: there is never any quiet, that they are exuberant in ways that can seem a bit forced, and that wearing a permanent beaming smile is compulsory?" That doesn't sound great.

“Do you mean, that in spite of life’s ups and downs that person has a genuine joy and security in their relationship with God, which, in line with Psalm 150, (lute and harp, tambourine and dancing) they are happy to express ?” That sounds pretty healthy.

The label just doesn’t cover it. Labels make us think we know what is going on, so we don’t bother to dig deeper.

That is what so nearly happened at this turning point in Israel’s history: they had a king, their first ever king, but things aren’t going very well, and the much revered spiritual leader of the land, the ageing prophet Samuel is directed by God to anoint a new king. He is sent to the town of Bethlehem, where he arranges to meet the family of a man called Jesse. There he is faced with 7 young men, all of them wondering ‘is it me that is going to be anointed ?’

Like all of us, even the great prophet Samuel had a tendency to judge to some extent by appearances, so he takes one look at the first one, Eliab, and thinks, yes, everything about him looks like king material. Surely, he’s the one. But he hears a clear whisper from God saying, ‘no, not him’. He goes on to the next one, and the next.

And then he gets to the end. Maybe there’s an embarrassing pause. So he says, do you have any other sons ?

Jesse answers truthfully, maybe hesitantly, well, yes, there is one other, but he is “young and looking after the sheep”. Jesse had unintentionally labelled his son as too young, not enough to offer. So, to his way of thinking, there was no need to look deeper. Labelling people makes us lazy and can hide the truth. But of course, David WAS the one, and with God’s help, Samuel saw that.

I don’t know if you’ve been labelled by a parent, a teacher, a friend, an employer, maybe yourself: at the very least, remember that God sees well beyond the label.

Hand in hand with labelling goes something else: David’s father didn’t reject David as a possible candidate, he just simply overlooked him.

- Overlooking people is much easier than we realise. Some people are just magnets, they get noticed. We remember to pray for them. There’s just something about them. But a few people easily get overlooked. I suspect we are all of us a bit more prone to overlook than we realise.

Whilst we think, that God never overlooks anyone, just one final thought and question:

- When we think of younger generations in the west, it’s easy to think: they’ve turned their back on Christian faith. I think it is more that following Christ as a way of life is not so much rejected as just overlooked, not seen to be relevant.

Often because people have never met anyone who has had the courage to talk about their own faith in however small and low-key a way. If people are simply overlooking us or overlooking Jesus himself, what can we do, as a church and as individuals, to change that ?