

Be perfect, as your photoshopped neighbour is perfect

What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and to lose their soul?

These words don't unsettle us as much as they might, because we imagine they apply to those who *have* the world within their grasp: Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon, Mark Zuckerberg, curator of the world's conversation or Elon Musk, science entrepreneur for whom the world is not enough and who now has eyes on colonising Mars.

We are mistaken, but not in the way we imagine. The risk is not that we gobble up the world and lose our soul, but that the world steals our soul and modifies it to serve its own purpose.

It has always been a challenge to the faithful to live in ways which are in keeping with the Gospel, but the forces that seek to control us today are more pervasive, more complicated and less understood than before. Quite simply, no-one knows where we are heading. The challenges do not need to be set out, but one economic testimony will suffice here. Earlier this year, the Chief Executive of Google said that artificial intelligence was going to have a bigger impact on the world than either electricity or fire. What will it mean to be human in that world? How can social and economic life be re-shaped to ensure all people are valued and can still earn a viable living?

And what of the human soul *today*? It is sometimes said that we live in an era of licence, where anything goes. Evidence points in the other direction, too. This is an age of rules. There is a strong, unwritten culture of ideals we are expected to live up to and which we can expect judgment for if we don't. And the headline is the requirement to be perfect in all things.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: 'be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect'. This call to moral perfection is a journey for every follower of Christ. It remains an incomplete one until the last day, when all things are made new in him. But it is not one that leads to despair or worthlessness. We fall short of this calling every day, but the rhythm of confession, forgiveness and restoration puts us back on our feet. And it all depends on God. Only the Holy Spirit in us makes this journey possible.

The call to a different kind of perfection in our culture, by contrast, is trashing our well-being. Its motif is: 'be perfect, as your photoshopped neighbour is perfect'. Our community is filled with a background hum as dangerous as an electric cable: to be admired and respected, to be considered worthy of attention and support, people must pursue a range of perfections. We must be fit, slim, beautiful and gregarious. We must pull our own weight in life and not depend on the welfare of others. We should own the right labels and have lots of friends. We must have more digital friends, likes and shares on social media, post the best photos of ourselves and the places we have visited that others haven't – however long it takes to get the right shot.

We must, in short, have it all. And if we haven't, we must pretend we have. There is much talk of being authentic in life, but the more we speak about it, the less we seem to deliver. These codes of personal perfection are unrealistic, so we deceive others in order to win. Where once the Christmas circular letter would annually serve up half-truths to an audience we wanted to think the better of us, now we must provide a round the clock service. It is relentless in its demands and to satisfy it, people concoct stories about themselves.

And it is ultimately a story about the self, rather than the community. The expectation is that the individual will deliver perfection, unaided. We permit those who succeed to say they succeeded because they wanted it more than others and we acclaim them as winners. The unspoken corollary is that those who don't succeed in life can safely be called losers because they didn't try hard enough. And so we condemn the poor, the plain and the lonely to their fate. Only by believing a lie – that each individual person stands alone, unsupported, the author of their own souls – is it possible to spin this line. The role that the community plays in outcomes – family, health, schooling, welfare, infrastructure, a sound economy, personal contacts, inherited wealth - all components in getting on in life – are carefully airbrushed out of the picture to ensure only the individual is seen in it. The perfect selfie.

If the psychology of adults has been damaged by this pervasive trend, how much more threatening is it likely to be for younger people who are still being formed in their identity? This week's Children's Society statistic that more than one in five girls has self-harmed in the last year is deeply distressing, and the roles that body image and social media profile played in this were uppermost.

Perfection is an insatiable idol. We attain one level, only to sense we have fallen short of another level. And the culture says we have only ourselves to blame for doing so. There is no absolution, only the re-gathering of self to succeed next time. As the author Oliver Burkeman has said:

When you approach life as a series of milestones to be achieved, you exist in a state of near-continuous failure. Almost all the time, by definition, you're not at the place you've defined as embodying accomplishment or success. And should you get there, you'll find you've lost the very thing that gave you a sense of purpose – so you'll formulate a new goal and start again.

This is the way the world steals and modifies our souls.

And it is into this culture that the Gospel has power to speak redeeming truth.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine said Isaiah in our reading.

There is nothing we can do for God that will deepen the acceptance we have with him. When we bring a child into the world, we don't begin to love them when they start to achieve in life; we love them without condition, from the moment we feel

the first stirrings in the womb. He first loved us. There is a place of spiritual poise God gives to his people which nothing on earth can surpass. We talk about people being 'grounded' today. It's a good choice of word, for it echoes the teaching of Jesus. We abide in God, achieving stuff is secondary. That is what we mean by grace.

Rochester diocese has a vision which it has named *Called Together*. We do not stand alone or make our own way in this world without any other goal than being a winner rather than a loser. We have been created in God's image. He loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us. He has a purpose for our redeemed lives. And we shall be made perfect together in Christ.

It is wishful thinking to imagine we can brush our culture's demands away like summer flies. We are surrounded by them. But we need to interrogate perfection, because an imposter has taken its form and is telling us lies we are believing and passing on.

There is a battle for the human soul today and we need to wake up to the new form it has so quickly taken. Confronting it should be part of our evangelism, part of our discipleship. It should be embedded in our parish churches and in our shared thinking. The bad news is, we are not winning this battle right now. The good news is, the future has already been secured for us in Jesus Christ.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

The only perfection we need is found in him.