

10 Ordinary A 2008

St. Raphael, Springdale, AR

You have probably heard the old saying, "Do not judge a book by its cover." In other words, don't read a book just because it happens to have a fancy cover, something that catches your eye. And, on the other hand, don't reject a book just because it has a tattered cover and is an eye-sore. It's what's on the inside that really counts. When I was in the seminary we didn't judge a book by its cover, but by what was on the first page, where the copy write is. That is, if the book was written before 1950 we immediately liked it, but if it was written after 1950, we rejected it out of hand, it wasn't worth reading. Now, that's a pretty extreme method of choosing good books, but it did greatly reduce our reading list! In fact, for us, the older the book was the better we figured it would be. You see, a good book is like a fine wine: the older it gets the better it tastes. I keep telling Dr. Chuck that it's okay that he's getting older, because he's getting better with age. For some strange reason, he doesn't like it when I say that.

In today's gospel, Jesus shows us that it's not just books that shouldn't be judged by their cover, people shouldn't be judged by their appearances either. Jesus visits Matthew, who was a tax-collector. Now, you have to understand that tax-collectors were despised by the Jews because they often raised taxes unfairly. Boy, it's a good thing we don't feel that way about the IRS, isn't it?! But the people had written off Matthew as a selfish, greedy man

because of his occupation, but Jesus didn't judge Matthew by his appearances. He saw that inside Matthew was a faithful disciple, a wise evangelist who would write one of the gospels, and a courageous martyr, who would die for Jesus. And so Jesus looked at him and said, "Follow me." You see, the people judge the "book" of Matthew by its cover, but Jesus decided to read the content.

Have you ever heard of Cyrano de Bergerac? He's actually a real, historical person who lived in France in the 1600's. A play was written about him by Edmund Rostand, and it became an immediate success. It is a classic story of seeing beyond a person's appearance. You see, Cyrano is an exceptionally talented man: he's a great speaker, a born leader, an eloquent poet, a brave swordsman, but he also has an incredibly large nose. And sadly, because of his pronounced nose, most people never see his many other great qualities. Well, the whole play is about how Cyrano falls in love with the beautiful Roxanne, but she doesn't love him because of his unsightly appearance. The great tragedy of the story is that it's only at the end of Cyrano's life – when he's wounded and dying – that she finally sees him for who he is, and the both profess their love for each other. That's the great tragedy of judging a book by its cover: you fail to see those who may really love you.

Folks, have you ever judged another person by their appearance instead of their character? I bet you have, and so have I. Recently, I visited an elderly couple at home to

give them Communion and to anoint them. A week later, a Eucharistic Minister took them Communion and the wife made this comment about my visit. She said: "Next time, please ask a white priest to come to the house, not a black one." That was said by one of our parishioners here at St. Raphael's. Hmm, and all this time my parents have told me I'm from India. You know, I wonder how many people will not vote for Barack Obama in this election just because of the color of his skin. Now, I'm not suggesting that you vote for him, that's for you to decide, but should his skin-color be the reason you do not vote for him? I bet that will be the deciding factor for some people. Isn't this one reason we allow abortion in this country? Think about it: we judge those little unborn babies in the womb by their physical appearance: they don't have blond hair and blue eyes and a sexy figure, so we can write them off. We think: why bother reading a book with a cover that looks like that? It's just a blob of tissue. Doesn't physical appearance "color" the way we look at immigrants, or at the elderly, or at the young? Heck, for that matter, doesn't our own physical appearance determine what we think about ourselves: the more beautiful we are, the more hair we have, the smaller our waistline is, the more we love ourselves. But you see, each human being is like a book, each one with an amazing story to tell – with joys and sorrows, with triumphs and failures, and with graces and miracles. But when we fail to get to know people, when we judge them by their outward appearance, we are the losers.

Martin Luther King Jr. once famously said: "I long for the day when a man will be judged not by the color of his skin but rather by the content of his character." What Dr. King desired was that we would not judge a book – or another human being – by its cover. May God give us the grace to know and love each person we meet, or at the very least to open the book to the first page.

Praised be Jesus Christ!