

19th June 2020

Labels

**“However kind and friendly they might be,
I, the man without a rag of a label to cover himself with,
could not fail to have some uneasy feelings ...”**

T H Huxley, Collected Essays, ‘Agnosticism’

For a short period, I was labelled “Eight Men” by the father of a minister colleague (the explanation of this pithy epithet will come later). Thankfully, it didn’t last, though it did leave me with some “uneasy feelings”. But some people have to labour under unsympathetic, or even downright nasty, labels all their days.

My daughter has two miniature Dachshunds, Oscar and Dougal. “Sausage dogs” we call them, because a Dachshund looks like a sausage on legs. Funny? Maybe. Do Oscar and Dougal mind? Probably not. But when distinguishing physical features cause people to be labelled fat or skinny, ginger or four-eyes, lanky or titch – and these are just the polite ones – it’s not funny at all. Sadly, we never *ask* if labelling people is OK. We just do it, and hang the consequences. The damage can be deep and lasting. But we don’t care. Labelling people is a game to be enjoyed.

In the Second Book of Kings (2:23-24) there’s a story of the prophet Elisha heading towards Bethel. Some boys from the town appear and mock his appearance. “Get out of here, baldy man,” they shout. The follically-challenged Elisha is *not* best pleased. So he curses the boys – in the name of the Lord, indeed! Then, two bears appear from the woods and maul forty-two of the boys. “Take that, you varlets!”

Oh, dear, dear! Labelling an old man as baldy? Not good. Conjuring up retribution on a grand scale? Even worse! Labelling a curse as God’s purposes? Let’s not go there ... But the lesson is this – labelling people in a nasty way can cause untold harm. So, let’s give it a miss, eh?

Oh ... and the “Eight Men” label? Try French ... Got it? It’s *Huit homme*. Wee Tom! Clear enough? You see now why I don’t like labels?

A prayer for today

Loving God, let us see beyond the physical, and celebrate the worth of every person.

Let us see beyond the obvious, to know each one as a child of God. Amen.

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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