

Sunday.23

I had dinner recently in a restaurant and the waitress had brilliant red hair, the kind that even an amateur can tell came out of a bottle, and tattoos covering all of her arms and shoulders and neck. The restaurant was in a part of Philadelphia which is as close in style and temperament to Greenwich Village in New York City as Philadelphia gets. If you are on the street there, you have to be ready to see outlandish styles of dress, and, of course, lots of piercing and tattoos. All this does nothing for someone of my age and background. When I was a child, an uncle had tattoos, and I was embarrassed when he came to the beach and his tattoos became visible. For me tattoos were definitely de classe. Today that is no longer the case. Very fashionable, very classy ladies get tattoos. But I have not moved. For me they continue to be a disfigurement of the body. So, if you have them, warn me so that I can look the other way.

When Eunice Kennedy Shriver died a few weeks ago, the papers were filled with praise for her as the founder of the Special Olympics. They credited her with changing the public's perception and response to handicapped people. And they pointed out that her work with the handicapped originated in her having had a sister,

Rosemary, who was mentally retarded. When the Kennedys could no longer cope with Rosemary's behavior, they placed her in an institution, and eventually her father, Joseph Kennedy, no doubt because of medical advice, had her lobotomized. But the point was that Rosemary was removed from society. Now people don't think that way. Our attitude towards the handicapped has changed because of people like Eunice Shriver.

Years ago I remember a grandmother, seriously ill, being visited by her grandson who was then a young man in his late teens. He had terrible mental problems, which have continued to this day. But all his grandmother could see was his uncut and uncombed hair. That was her conversation with him: "Why don't you cut your hair?" And now this man's aunt has pretty much the same thing to say to him twenty years later.

Appearances matter. Think of that woman in England, Susan Boyle, a middle-aged "frumpy" woman (her own self-description) who appeared on a talent show. The audience was snickering until she opened her mouth and began to sing. She could sing. They were on their feet when she finished her song.

We all judge by appearances. Even our love lives begin with our eyes. We are attracted to someone by his or her good looks. But, as the old saying teaches us, beauty is only skin-deep. We have to go beyond beauty. And we have to begin to look at each other as Jesus looked at people. His heart went out to those who were handicapped. He opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. I can just imagine what this morning's Gospel means to someone like Fr. Bruce. He pointed out to me that in today's Gospel Jesus take the deaf man aside. In others words, according to Fr. Bruce, he took him aside so that he could understand him better, could try to read his lips.

In today's second reading from The Letter of James the Christian community is admonished not to treat the wealthy with more respect than it shows the poor. No, it should follow Jesus who showed a preferential love for the poor, the downtrodden, the handicapped.

If our religion means anything, it means that the God who has revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth has this preferential love for the little ones among us. It is their healing, their being cared for, which tells us that the Kingdom of God has begun among us.