

# From the inside out in an upside down world

*by Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester*

The recent Good Childhood Report 2016 produced by The Children's Society has highlighted that 1 in 7 girls aged 10 to 15 are unhappy with their lives, and that more than one third of girls are unhappy with their appearance. This was identified as an underlying cause of low self-esteem and poor mental health. One girl summed up a key preoccupation of her generation by saying, 'we have to be perfect, like Barbie'.

It is questionable whether any human being actually looks like Barbie, but the implication is that perfection is defined not by internal character but instead by external, physical appearance.

Psalms 139.14 presents us with the beautiful truth that each individual is unique and 'wonderfully made'. The creation narrative in Genesis 1 tells of human beings made in the 'image' of God (v26). Image is not about external appearance. It is about having the potential to reflect God's character.

God is love, and relationship is central to our Trinitarian God. It is from relationship and love that God's attributes, such as justice, mercy, goodness, creativity and wisdom, emerge.

Sadly, in our brokenness we have marred God's image in us and failed to love God, our neighbour and ourselves (Matthew 22.37-39). Yet just as our imperfection begins deep within us, so does our redemption and our flourishing. Dying and rising with Christ begins with our hearts and not our external appearance.

All of this is at odds with the disturbing fact that for many girls their sense of self-worth is located in the way they view their appearance.

There is a powerful story in the Old Testament in which the prophet Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to identify and anoint a new king. Samuel visits Jesse and his sons and looks at their appearance in order to identify the right man.

'But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."'

1 Samuel 16.7

This message is very different from the one piggybacking the images and stories children are bombarded with. Models strut catwalks wearing clothes labelled size zero. Fashion is equated with beauty and the message is therefore that to be beautiful you have to look a certain way.

Magazines and social media bombard girls with messages about hair, makeup and clothes. In themselves these things are not inherently evil, but the implicit message is all too often that certain products bring happiness. Words like 'perfect' and 'flawless' frequently appear in messages about makeup; and hashtags such as #wokeuplikethis #beautifulgirl and #fotd (face of the day) are all about appearance.

Girls are affirmed or discouraged by how many 'likes' their photos receive, whilst female celebrities are often presented as successful, desirable and worthy of intimate relationship because of their outward appearance.

Alongside all of this, we also live in a society where so many children suffer from obesity. Whilst we know obesity leads to greater health risks, the way we talk about obesity is more often focused on external appearance rather than health and flourishing. When children are chastised for eating too much, they are usually warned that 'it will make you fat'. The message becomes focused on body shape when the real issue is health. The reason for not eating the second doughnut is not because it will make you fat and therefore ugly, but because it is not positively contributing to your health.



Our messages about eating and exercise need to focus much more on well-being and loving one's self rather than one's appearance.

Every child, made in God's image, naturally wants to be loved and to give love. It is imperative that none of us collude with any message that says perfect love is bound up with outward appearance.

Distressingly, children come face to face with messages about outward appearance from a young age.

Many traditional children's stories are full of princesses who are sought by princes, and who are deserving of love. Princesses' goodness seems to be reflected in their physical appearance. Despite the blockbuster children's movie 'Frozen' challenging many of the traditional 'princess' stereotypes through the great strength of character displayed by Anna and Elsa, their positive attributes were by no means decoupled from their external appearance. These acclaimed princesses still have waspish waists and long flowing hair. Girls' desire to be like Anna and Elsa has resulted in extraordinary sales of lookalike costumes and replica dolls. Once again, the focus is on the external.

As an ever-clearer body of evidence points to girls' self-esteem being bound up with their physical appearance, there is undoubtedly a need to speak out strongly against this message – not least when it appears in children's stories.

Yet we also live in a society with a strong blame culture. To break this we need to recognise our own culpability and social responsibility, whilst recognising that the only thing we have ultimate power to change is ourselves. Acknowledgement of this painful truth gives rise to the question of how every one of us can play a part in changing the statistics revealed in The Good Childhood Report 2016.

We know that listening to young people is important. Being serious about listening is about providing opportunities for young people to say what is important to them, what they are thinking and feeling, and how they see themselves in the world around them. Yet, if we are going to pay attention and listen, then we also need to pay attention to what we say. What messages are we giving in the words we say to children and young people? So often we unwittingly collude with an over-emphasis

on appearance.

External appearance is often part of those introductory sentences in social encounters between adults and girls. How often have you heard or used sentences such as the following: 'You look great', 'That's a gorgeous dress', 'Who did your hair for you? It looks lovely'.

The intention is usually one of wanting to affirm and value the child. Yet the value affirmed is their external appearance. There is a lack of validation of internal character. It is interesting that with boys, there is often a greater emphasis on internal attributes: 'You're strong', 'That's brave', 'You're cheeky'.

The challenge for each of us is to ensure our language and our words validate every child as a whole person. How are we speaking to their inner being? Their character? This is about our encouragement and challenge of children, focusing on the heart of who they are so that they can continue to grow and flourish in becoming who God calls them to be. Such a journey does not begin with external appearance.

Of course, this is not about denying the body. We are created as bodily beings and the way we appear says something about us. And that's the key. Our bodies and appearance are 'something about us' rather than our identity. We mustn't perpetuate any idea that goodness and perfection are associated with a particular sort of appearance.

At this point it is worth underlining that none of this is about promoting a message that appearance doesn't matter, or worst still, that any attention to appearance is somehow ungodly. Such messages can also be very damaging. Sadly it is not uncommon in some faith contexts for girls to be chastised for paying attention to clothes, jewellery or make up. This is wrongly labelled as 'vanity' because vanity is not about external appearance, but rather is a quality of the heart and motivated by pride.

In our intent to increase girls' happiness and self-esteem there should be no desire to discourage them from enjoying expressing who they are. Clothes, jewellery, nails and hair can surely be celebrated when they are expressing something about the individual's delight in their identity; as they go on discovering what it means to live life to the full in relationship with others and with God.

Our interaction with young people needs to be intentional about nurturing and validating their identity at the core of their being. God's love for us is such that God desires to fashion our hearts (Psalm 33.15). The shape of who we are becoming begins within us. Yet so much of our society's nuanced messaging to girls and young women has created an environment where too great an emphasis on outer appearance is hampering their formation and damaging their inner sense of well-being.

Perhaps the message for all of us is that in a society where so many people's lives are continually being turned upside down, we need to ensure that things are ordered inside out.