

Imagine if all the teams working here at the Diocesan Offices were ranked from most important to least important –

would your team be in the top three?

Imagine if a visitor turned up at your church one Sunday – and at the end of the service this visitor told you –

that your church is more welcoming than the church in the next-door parish.

Would you believe it?

If you've answered "yes" to these questions –

you may be absolutely right –

but it's also possible that you've just fallen for a psychological phenomenon:

Illusory Superiority.

This is the feeling – the *illusion* – that we're probably better than other people –

healthier than average

more popular than our friends – and

more contented in our relationships.

When people are asked about their driving – it turns out that 90% of drivers believe they're above average.

But if you think about it – you'd expect around half to be above average – and half below.

So how come 90% say they're above average?

Well – it's Illusory Superiority.

You can even ask leading academic psychologists who know all about this illusion:

"Are you better than the average psychology professor?"

And over 90% will tell you – with a perfectly straight face:

Yes. – They think they probably are ...!

I'm in danger of falling into the same trap – when I believe that I'll speak at the office Eucharist so much better than any bishop or archdeacon...!



We find an example of Illusory Superiority in our Gospel reading today.

When the disciple – John – sees someone –

someone who *isn't* Jesus – or one of the Twelve Apostles –

casting out demons in Jesus' name –

he's outraged – and tries to stop this apparent imposter.

After all –

 this stranger isn't one of *them* –
 this isn't someone that Jesus has especially *chosen* –
 surely – he can't be doing any *good!*

It's Illusory Superiority.

It's the kind of boasting that James – in his epistle – describes as “evil”.

And John's sense of superiority really *is* an illusion.

He's deluding himself.

Just in case we're in any doubt –

 we only need to remind ourselves that earlier on in the very same chapter of Mark's
 Gospel –
 Jesus' disciples have failed to do what this stranger is doing –
 in other words – casting out a demon.

So, I wonder if the penny begins to drop.

And John suddenly realises that – maybe he's *not* that superior, after all.

Perhaps – actually – horrible to admit – he's a bit of a failure –
 and he feels *threatened* by this apparent outsider.



Not all of us suffer from an inflated sense of superiority.

A lot of the time – we can feel *inferior* – as if other people are better than we are.

As a teenager, I didn't always look forward to the end of the school term.

 Yes. There was the prospect of the holidays.
 But I would also get my school report.

Instead of giving pupils a grade –

 the school I went to –
 ranked every pupil in every subject – in order.

So – I'd discover that I was – something like ...

 fourth best in maths –
 eleventh best in geography –
 and in history – which I actually ended up failing – 29th in a class of 30 pupils.

It was a great way of puncturing my inflated ego – and making me feel decidedly average.

It's not always comfortable being ranked – and yet it happens a lot – even in the Church.

Over the last few years – I've learned that – your position in the Cathedral procession – really
 matters –
 with the most important clergy near the back.

There's a danger that we think of ourselves – as somehow “less good” – than those “super Christians”.

Some of us are ordained as priests – or even bishops –
but others are “just” lay.

Some believers are “spirit filled” –
but the rest of us *aren't*.

Some Christians claim to be “born again” –
while the rest of us *struggle* on through life's temptations and sins.

So, we can end up feeling distinctively second-rate.



But – of course – the truth is that none of us is any better – and none of us is any worse than anyone else.

We're all wonderfully made in God's image.

We're all loved and precious in God's sight.

And yet we're all flawed sinners.

And this little story in today's Gospel reading – reminds us –
that each one of us can join in with the work of Jesus –
metaphorically –
or maybe literally –
driving out demons in his name.

We all have a part to play –
whether or not we belong to some kind of “inner circle”.

I don't know whether you *are* an above average driver.

I don't know whether your church *is* more welcoming than your neighbour.

And I really don't know – which are the most important diocesan teams.

But I do know we need each other.

We all have a vital part to play.

We're all called by God.

And none of us who bear the name of Christ – who do God's work –
can possibly lose our heavenly reward.