

ABOUT FACE

As a beauty, I'm not a great star;
There are others more handsome by far.
But, my face I don't mind it,
Because I'm behind it;
It's the others in front that I jar!

You will be relieved to know that I didn't write this limerick. In fact, it's by our old friend Anon, and I sincerely hope that it doesn't apply to any of my readers. But it does express one significant fact; faces are important. Just think how many of our everyday expressions involve them. If we've done something wrong, we may have to face up to it, or else face the music, and in so doing, we may lose face. On the other hand, we may set our face against such a course, which may involve a face-off. If we are deceitful, we are double-faced, and people won't take us at face value. Faces, faces, faces! There seems no end to them.

Think how important faces are when we want to recognise someone. The other day I was waiting for the minibus when a friend said to me, "Isn't that Mary over there?" I looked and said, "It might be her, but I can't be sure – she's got her back to me. If she turned round and I could see her face, then I'd know for certain." Yes, it's the face by which we recognise people. That's why, of course, thieves and similar villains often wear masks. Indeed, the face often gives away thoughts and feelings that we'd rather keep hidden. Think how actors on film or on television can express so much in big close-up without saying a word. Truly, politicians are brave to allow themselves to be interviewed on television, although I suspect they are trained in keeping a straight face.

So if in fact our faces reveal so much of us, what might we learn if we were to see the face of God?

This immediately raises two important questions. Firstly, you might want to ask if there is any such person as God. We could have a long debate on this. Let me cut it short by saying that I have no doubts on the matter. Then if God does exist, has he got a face? That's a tricky one. In the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, Moses is bold enough to ask to see God's glory. God graciously permits this, but adds a warning: "You cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live." Yet further on in the story of Moses, the writer says that the LORD knew him "face to face." I don't believe that God has a face in the physical sense. But if we think of a face as something that reveals all about us, then yes, I think he does. That could be why he prevented Moses seeing his face. There are limits to what the human mind can take in.

How does that help us? Let's turn from the Old Testament to the New. Here God does have a face we can look at, and it's the face of Jesus. Jesus, I believe, was perfect God and perfect man. As a man, he had a face just like our own. People were able to look at his face. They were also free to turn their backs on it, to spit on it, to hit it – and they did. But what if they had looked directly into Jesus's face? What if we could do this – what would we see? Lloyd C. Douglas, the American author, imagines an exchange that might have taken place between Jesus and the unloved and villainous tax collector Zacchaeus. Jesus asks Zacchaeus what made him seek for peace, a peace that he had never known. "Good master," replies Zacchaeus, "I saw mirrored in your eyes the face of the Zacchaeus I was meant to be." Could it be that, if we were to look into the face of God, we should see there, not our errors and our failings, but the face of the person that God had always intended us to be? That would be frightening, and yet, what a marvellous opportunity. Would we be bold enough to take it?

Paul Scott