

Faces

From the first lesson:

And when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking to the Lord.

And from the second lesson:

For God has caused his light to shine in our hearts, the light which is knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

As human beings we are fascinated by other people's faces and if we are given to narcissism we can even be fascinated by our own. It doesn't matter whether the faces are old or young, beautiful or not so beautiful – our eyes are drawn to faces. And it's hardly surprising: because faces are barometers of our feelings. A smile, a raised eyebrow, the widening of the eyes, the scowl, the downturned mouth tell us all we need to know. Our faces are a window onto our souls and an exposure of our thoughts and feelings and as such our faces can be as changeable as the English weather. In fact, I've been at meetings, where I have seen in the faces of others, all four seasons in a matter of five minutes.

Someone once said that by the time we are 50 we get the face we deserve. By that I think that they mean that in repose the face can sum up a person's essential personality and character. The confidence and self-satisfied of the smug; the anxious, nervousness of the insecure; the underlying unhappiness of the depressive; the impish mischief of the troublemaker or the comedian. I remember a Canon at Durham Cathedral who had a permanent look of disapproval expressed by his pursed lips. We nicknamed him as 'the mouth that sucked a thousand lemons'.

But all faces reflect the vicissitudes of life – our joys and sorrows. Often our stresses and strains are etched in lines and wrinkles. It is instructive to look at what the pressures of being prime minister did to the face of Tony Blair. He looks utterly haggard and exhausted.

But faces can also reveal something of our relationship with God. The great spiritual writer Donald Nichol who wrote that great spiritual classic *Holiness*, made an intriguing decision when he was told that he was dying. He surrounded his bedroom with icons. But for the most part the icons weren't paintings of well-known saints, they were photographs of the faces of people. Spiritual people who had made a deep impression upon him or helped transform his understanding of what it is to be a human being in Christ. There were bishops, priests, monks and nuns among the pictures; but most were lay people who like him had lived holy lives. And the common denominator which ran throughout these diverse photographs of faces is that they radiated the presence of God. In their faces you could see the joy of life in all its fullness. It was almost as though those people were already in their earthly life partially living in heaven. Because in their faces was to be seen something of the face of Jesus Christ.

In this morning's first lesson we are told that Moses' face shone after his encounter with Yahweh the God of Israel to such an extent that he needed to place a veil over it. St Paul too in this morning's second lesson talks about how the hearts and faces of those who are holy shine forth with the glory of Jesus Christ.

I know the truth of this from personal experience. When I was 19, I visited the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Ennismore Gardens in London. Just outside the Cathedral, I met Metropolitan Anthony, at that time the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church in Britain. It was a brief encounter but one I will never forget. His face was alive with the presence of Christ

and his eyes were like fire. I knew that I was in the presence of holiness. At that relatively young age I knew that God could live in us and make his home in us; and that the visible sign of this was to be seen in our face. Having seen it, I'm always on the look out for it because I know that it is one of the ways in which God reveals himself to us today.

So let's be alert to the face of Jesus Christ in those around us in unexpected people and in surprising places and be ready to welcome him in others. But I want to end with a question we might all like to ponder: what kind of face do we present to the world and does it reflect the face of Jesus Christ?