

Sermon preached by James Knowles, Cathedral Reader  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2018: The Transfiguration of Our Lord

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‘Glory to God in the highest. Luke tells us that Jesus’ face shone and his clothes became dazzling white. Artists portray glory in paintings, with white and gold and strong primary colours. Composers express it in the major keys and with trumpets. Earthly Glory promises immortality, but rarely brings peace and goodwill. For every victor someone must be vanquished. For the few who have their face immortalised in sculpture, in a haughty portrait and their name recorded in the annals of history, the rest of humanity passes through life, recorded but faceless, often pushed aside, ignored, disfigured or even effaced.

We see on the news, bleeding, bruised, burned faces, and faces contorted with sorrow or totally drained of emotion. Survivors hide their faces when they give an account of their sufferings. They fear recognition and

reprisals. Our face is who we are to ourselves and to others. When we think of someone, an important part of that recall is a mental image of that person's face. We recognise other people by their faces, even if we can't always remember their name. Almost from birth, a baby recognises the mother's face. If we have a smart passport, a machine in immigration scans our face and if it can recognise us from the passport photograph, it lets us back into the country.

When some of us trained as cathedral guides, Sarah Friswell said, 'when you first meet someone, you have seven seconds in which to make a good impression'. Our face not only identifies us, it is the principal way in which we present ourselves. Our face is the mirror of the soul. For Italians to be told that one has *La bella figura* (beautiful figure) is the height of praise. In Western culture, the Grecian profile has been the gold standard. We associate good-looking people, often wrongly, with being pleasant, confident, trustworthy and competent.

Does our face fit? All of us consciously and unconsciously try to present our best face to the world. Just as we make judgements about others, we use similar criteria to judge ourselves, and we don't always like the verdict. When we look into the mirror of our souls, the face that we see doesn't always fit our expectations.

When we are found wanting we adopt various strategies. We try to enhance our image. You may remember in the sitcom 'Keeping Up Appearances'; Patricia Routledge played Margot Bucket or 'Bouquet' as she liked to be called, who took this to ridiculous lengths. We may have laughed, but there was certainly inside me a bit that squirmed.

Unlike celebrities, most people can't afford image consultants, but to make themselves feel more secure, they run after things that will make others see them in a good light, success, possessions and power, what Kipling called 'the dew that men call fame, the dross that men call gold'. 'For these we undergo our hot and

godless days'. Many work ridiculous hours and sometimes leave behind a trail of unsatisfactory relationships. Success rarely satisfies; many people do not have possessions, their possessions possess them, or hold power as much as power holds them. These things may bring fleeting pleasure but little joy.

The Italians have another expression: *la Brutta figura* (ugly figure) is more than just ugliness: it's also appearing mean, unpleasant, greedy or impolite. Those of us, who are not sometimes afraid, that other people can see that face that looks back at us when we look into our hearts, are very fortunate. To feel that we are disfigured in other people's eyes, breeds resentment: if we can't make our own faces shine, we can disfigure those people who we think look down on us. In the last two weeks we have seen two extreme and terrible examples. In Worcester, a three-year-old boy had corrosives thrown over him in an attack that was meant for his mother. Last week, here in Bury a handicapped woman was smothered in flour and eggs, while sitting on a park bench. We don't

need to spray corrosives, because corrosive speech is so much more powerful. Bullying at school has driven children as young as 10 to kill themselves. People don't bully those who are completely different from them, but those whose perceived defects highlight the things that the bullies fear and hate about themselves. Social media has meant that abuse can penetrate the walls at home, so there is no escape after school.

'Bear not false witness: let the lie have time on its own wings to fly'. 'Negative campaigning and 'fake news', which can now fly at the speed of light, poison our public discourse. We know this is wrong, but sometimes we listen happily when ill is spoken of others; we don't refute it, and are delighted if it comes back suitably amplified.

Society can disfigure people unintentionally when it turns them into celebrities, heaping on them a weight of glory they cannot bear. Almost inevitably, they fall off their pedestals. 'Schadenfreude', pleasure in the failure of others, sells newspapers because we regard

the successful with a mixture of admiration and envy, and want to find chinks in their armour. There wouldn't have been a phone hacking scandal, if people weren't fascinated by the private lives of those who seem to have it all. Those with humdrum existences want to see the successful taken down a peg or two, to make them lose face, so that they can feel better about themselves.

Even in this individualistic age, most people have a creed and nearly everyone a country. Both these are integral to the way they see themselves. At the Reformation, Protestants defaced the images of the saints. Today, more people than ever face persecution for their various beliefs from those who wish to deface or efface them. When threatened, religions persecute those whose beliefs challenge theirs, and the smaller the differences, often the fiercer the conflict. In his book 'Sapiens', Yuval Noah Harari writes that on St Bartholomew's Day in 1572, Catholics killed between 5 and 10,000 of their Protestant neighbours, more than the total number of

Christians who had been martyred under the Roman Empire. When countries go to war, the enemy becomes a faceless threat. In WW1, British soldiers going over the top did not see the faces of a foe, whose customs and culture were similar to their own; they probably saw a grey blur. There are over 34 million refugees and internally displaced people whose faces don't fit anywhere.

It is hard to think that anything remotely good could come from something so destructive as WW1, but one positive spin-off was that, plastic surgery became a scientific medical discipline. Sir Harold Gillies set up the first plastic surgery unit at Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup to deal with the flow of casualties whose faces were wrecked by shrapnel, burns and chemicals. Gillies and his team took and transfigured those disfigured faces. Although they would generally never look as they had before, surgery enabled many of those young men to face the world again.

We are so much more aware of our disfigured world than those who went before us. It is easy to despair, to sit back in comfort and to see the suffering as less than real people. Transfiguration can be hard to find, but it is there if we have eyes to see. In his novel, 'A Time of Hope', CP Snow's protagonist Lewis Elliot writes of his youthful dream of love as 'searching for the other part of ourselves, of the other being who will make us whole, of the ultimate and transfiguring union'. Love, when we turn our gaze away from ourselves to God, towards significant others and to our neighbour, transfigures them and us. Transfiguration changes the soul.

Jesus, 'love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be', transfigured those he encountered, in their own eyes and of those around them. He made the lame to walk, the blind to see, so that they became once more able to make a living. He cleansed lepers, once more turning them from a threat to be shunned, to be accepted members of their community. Transfiguring others can be dangerous: more



controversially, Jesus transfigured those who were considered morally disfigured, the sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes; those whom the holy people needed to look down on in order to make themselves feel good. The events on Tabor came at the highpoint of Jesus' popularity; thereafter those holy people plotted against him and he died disfigured in body and condemned as a criminal on the cross.

We come to the Eucharist searching for the ultimate and transfiguring union, but must first confess that we have marred God's image within us. In bread and wine we receive Christ's body and blood so that transfigured into Christ's likeness we may play our part in transforming this waste of our wraths and sorrows into his kingdom.