

How good are you at reading people's faces? On a scale of 1-10 would you say that you are pretty accurate or pretty hopeless? Of course we know that some people are easier to read than others, but pressed into a jam packed Tube train on Friday night with a party of excitable young Japanese students, I began to wonder how similar facial expressions are, the world over? After a few minutes I thought that, probably, their facial expressions were pretty much what you might expect in anybody – but of course I might have been entirely wrong!

By chance today's readings – about what happens to the face of Moses and then of Jesus - happens to fall on Valentine's Day. And the description of what happened to Moses and Jesus in their meetings with God is similar to that which happens to anyone who is in love: their faces change. Any third party can easily see what is going on: and what is true for lovers is also true for parents with their children. And, by and large, we can't control it. Our faces are give-aways.

Perhaps that is why I was always very uneasy about the story of Pinocchio. You may be familiar with the 1883 original version by Carlo Collodi or the Disney version of 1940; either way you will remember the story of the somewhat naïve puppet who goes on a great adventure in the hope of becoming a real boy. As he gets involved with (anything but) Honest John, Gideon and Stromboli, he finds himself lying time and time again to the good Fairy who is trying to help him. I remember having the most vivid childhood nightmares as, under the Fairy's spell, I recalled seeing Pinocchio's nose grow longer and longer until it reached the far side of the room.

Now Bob Hope was able to make a great joke out of his nose: he used to say that on a screen test, his nose could be caught on camera a good ten minutes before the rest of his face. By contrast, for Pinocchio, it was his lying that automatically led to his expanding protuberance.

Whether we are in love, or whether we are pretending to be one thing when we are really another, our faces will reveal all too easily what is going on inside us – Pinocchio and all.

And that is surely how it ought to be? Surely we ought to be able to see in one another's faces our real feelings, so that we can respond accordingly? Isn't that what lies at the heart of the burka debate where the veiling of faces by certain members of the Muslim community is causing such a furore. Few, I believe, object to the wearing of a traditional headscarf or hijab, any more than one would resent the wearing of a skull cap or a fez – or indeed a nun's wimple. The current issue is not about whether people can express their religious faith or not through what they wear but whether the use of the niqab or face veil is acceptable in a western democracy. Liberal though I would always wish to be - accepting almost anything that was worn as a matter of conscience - I really do believe that the complete face veil, the burka, is a step too far.

And the reason for that is, in part, spelled out for us this morning in the way the word 'veil' is treated in Scripture. In short a veil is to be, at best, a temporary necessity, something which needs to be set aside as soon as possible. So it was that Moses hid his face in a veil after his meeting with God – simply because his face shone so much people it gave people a headache!

Slightly differently, in our second reading, St Paul uses the word veil as a euphemism for Jewish hard-heartedness and their resistance to Jesus' claim to be the Messiah for which they had long waited. Their minds were so dead set against Jesus that it was as if they had put a metaphorical veil over the faces so that they could not see the obvious. It reminds me of that famous line from the one of Lenny Henry's characters: *Talk to the hand 'cos the face ain't listening.*

Finally, you will remember that on Good Friday, at the moment Jesus dies, the veil (or curtain) in the Jerusalem Temple that screened off the secret Holy of Holies from the rest of the building, was torn to shreds. God opened up the path between himself and us when Jesus gave up his life on Calvary. Given these three examples, you would have to say that the word veil gets a fairly negative press in both books of the Bible! We long to see the face of God: so the words, *This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him.* Equally we need to see the face of one another.

And that takes us neatly back to the whole thing about love and loving, for whatever is true about those in love, looking into each other's faces is the most natural thing to do! Even among friends it is pretty central: as the Book of Acts records when St Paul is leaving

them for the last time we read that *the people cried when they remembered that they would see his face no more. We want to hang on to the last sight of those we love.*

That is very much the sentiment of most of the squillions of Valentine cards that will be sent and received today, all over the world, the descendants of the love tokens sent in the Roman world on the feast of Lupercalia when that fat little cherub, Cupid (the Latin version of Piccadilly Circus' Greek god Eros) became the messenger for people asking *Will you be my love?* As is so often the case the Christian Church found a way into all that by linking the day with the totally unknown figure of St Valentine.

But the message is pretty much the same: *be mine!* It is a direct descendant of Cupid's message and it has all the same overtones of possessiveness: *Love me and I'll love you.* The word that comes from this tradition in English is 'cupidity'. Not, I grant you, one we often use but it is – I'm afraid – all about the passion of possession: its about avarice and greed!

Now I don't want to be a kill-joy on St Valentine's Day but this isn't actually very much to do with Christian love at all! Because (leaving St Valentine to one side for a moment), Christian love is the exact opposite of *if you don't love me I won't love you.* It has no time for exclusive relationships founded on some kind of pre-nup contract or any kind of agreements about what is 'true'. In Jesus, hanging on the Cross, love takes on a completely different form altogether: it is about welcoming and caring for absolutely anyone and everyone who wants to be a part of our lives – whether they like us/love us or not. It isn't possessiveness that drives us on but unselfish generosity.

So when Jesus' face shines like the sun, on a hill, with his closest friends, their instinct is to try to set the experience in stone: *let's build a shrine here – one for Jesus one for Moses and one for Elijah.* In their own way the poor disciples were trying to keep their fantastic experience of pure love locked up as a keep-sake: *This is so good, let's keep this to ourselves. Let's have a love-in among the special people here. Let's keep it all within the veil.*

Jesus, of course, will have none of it. The vision fades, the voice from heaven falls silent and, the account in Luke tells us, *Jesus was found to be alone.*

But then that is the way of Christian loving, isn't it? It can't be kept in a cupboard and it will not make demands. If it is authentic it will simply be an offering – for others to accept or reject as they will. As Caroline and Anthony, one of the couples to be married this year, recognised in this poem:

**True love is a sacred flame
That burns eternally,
And none can dim its special glow
Or change its destiny.
True love speaks its tender tones
And hears with gentle ear.
True love gives with open heart
And true love conquers fear.
True love makes no harsh demands
It neither rules nor binds
And true love holds with gentle hands
The hearts that it entwines.** [Helen Steiner Rice]

On this St Valentine's Day we pray for all who are due to be married, not least Ernest and Sophie, Anthony and Caroline, Gary and Claire, Barry and Hayley, Ben and Zoe, Alexander and Anneka.

We pray that they will each nurture in each other that unselfish love of Jesus, giving without counting the cost, rather than the ephemeral possessiveness of chubby little cupid. We pray too that they will find in us, in this and in every Christian congregation – a people who are known for their open faces and open hearts, the people who have set aside their veils, the people who love and who love freely. For the truth is, our faces will tell others what we are really thinking anyway!