

Sometimes it's a cinch to pick the winner, other times the competition is so tight that try as you might it's gridlock, logjam and Brexit negotiations all the way. Too much choice can clog the machinery, with a smorgasbord to pick from nothing seems to suits the palate. So it's easy enough to determine which English monarch has had the longest reign: we're still living through it, but set yourself the task of choosing the ugliest statue of Queen Victoria, and it will soon become clear that the competition is so tight no clear victor (or Victoria) ever emerges. Choosing the best Cliff Richard Song should not tax anyone longer than a second, it being the first one, Move it! Go for the worst tune and suddenly it's a much more crowded playing field and you'll be there trying to choose till rain stops play. Picking the best Harper Lee novel is no shakes: only one complete one has ever been published and it's a stonker: Shakespeare's plays are also all stonkers, but picking the cream of that crop is an impossible call to make, only marginally less difficult than deciding which is the worst Jeffrey Archer book. There are too many Yorkshire towns, cities and villages competing for the rôle of the last place on earth you'd ever want to live, but the best feature of the county pretty much picks itself: being, of course, the MI.

And that said motorway has once again brought me to my desired destination which is, this morning / evening, to share with you the competition for the silliest comment anyone has made to me in the course of my ministry. The field has been massively narrowed down by the facts that I'm duty bound not to mention anything a bishop has ever said to me, and also that it would be inapt and indeed inept of me to choose any remark made since I landed in Beddington as I'd like to make it home today in one piece, so the choice before us is a small selection of East London *bon mots*.

Having accompanied one of my parishioners to the coroner's court for the inquest into her son's death, when it ended we retired with some of the late son's friends to the next door pub. Pubs make me nervous at the best of times, but wearing a clerical collar in an East End local is just one small notch down from entering the tap room with your knickers on your head. You're basically inviting attention of the worst kind. I suppose the speaker was just trying to make me feel more at ease by engaging in small talk, but what sort of planet have you just beamed down from if you hand your friend's mum's clericals-clad priest the drink you've just bought him and then use the conversation opener, 'so what do you do for a living?'

Still that is not quite as grossly unobservant as 'Are you pregnant Father?'. OK, given the curious fact that many liturgical vestments resemble a maternity dress you may

not think this too strange a comment, but addressed to 'Father' are you pregnant? does suggest either a lack of familiarity with basic reproductive biology or perhaps even more alarmingly an over-developed, positively mediaeval belief in the possibility of miracles.

Most curious- and strangely cutting too- was when I was told 'Well Father, your face is your fortune' which were it true, I suppose, might have explained a lot. I'm sure it was meant as a compliment but given that I was knee deep in a gruelling ministry in the armpit of Essex at the time it was made, it didn't really say great things about my face.

Happily, as you may or may not have noticed, in Christian ministry one's appearance- facial or otherwise- has no bearing one way or another on one's fortunes. A quick glimpse at one of those group photos of the Lambeth Conference will prove that beyond contradiction.

This is why the Old Testament {reading set for today} [story of the selection of David to be King] is so peculiar. Just in case the excitement of the gradual hymn has led you to forget, let me refresh your memory of the tale. God tells Samuel that he's had enough of King Saul and sends him off to anoint one of Jesse's sons king instead. Samuel fills his horn with oil and makes haste to Jesse's place. Only when he gets there he finds that Jesse and his Mrs have been busy over the years, and God has omitted to tell Samuel first which of Jesse's many sons he wants to be king. So Jesse's progeny are paraded before Samuel for him to choose the right candidate, but each time one passes, God looks and says 'No'. Finally, all the sons have been appraised and none have proved satisfactory. 'Any more?' asks what by now sounds like a desperate Samuel of Jesse, and what do you know, there is one more, the youngest who's barely a boy, off tending the sheep. So David is brought before the prophet of the Lord, and God says 'He's the one' and there and then he's anointed King. What is curious here, is that the way the story is written it appears that this curious procession of sons has, however implausibly, been a sort of beauty pageant.

*[David] was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."*

Now this really is an oddity. Are we supposed to take it that God, who sees into our hearts, and knows all their secrets, who has known us inside out from our mother's womb, who knows our every up side and our every down side; that God chooses David on the basis of his fetching face? It's clearly preposterous to suggest that God's

gaze is turned by a pretty youth or that He favours handsome looks. But as far as this tale is concerned, those looks did seem to figure in the selection of David to be Israel's king, otherwise, why bother bringing them up? It's so unusual for any character in the Bible to be described by how they look, that we can be certain that that sentence dedicated to David's beauty is not just by-the-by incidental colouring. It's meant to be there, we're meant to understand in no uncertain terms that David was eye candy: it's an integral part of the tale.

So when God chose a King for Israel that future king's looks did matter. Why? Well, it's not that God thinks it's important for a king to be good looking: he doesn't think that, but he knows humans do.

How someone looks is the first thing we notice about them, and if somebody looks 'good', we treat them in a different way to somebody who doesn't. We don't like to think we're so superficial, but study after study, time after time shows we are. We're more polite to pretty people, we're more likely to believe what they're saying, to give them a promotion, to buy a used car from them, to give them money if they're collecting for charity, to forgive them their failings and to think they're doing a better job than they actually are. That's just a tiny selection of ways beauty gets preferential treatment and we haven't even got onto the cattle market that is matchmaking yet. When we tell our children fairy tales the Damsel in distress is always beautiful, and the Prince is always handsome, even though in terms of happy ever after it would be far more useful if he was kind, considerate and did an equal share of the housework. We don't like to think we're superficial like that, we all want to believe that beauty is on the inside, personality matters and so on, but everything from the size of the beauty counter at Boots to the ever increasing number of people burdened with body image disorders should suggest to us that deep down we know that how we look is essential to the way human interactions work. Which all goes to show not only that we're social animals and what other people thinks really matters to us, but also, that we're not nearly as smart as we'd like to think we are.

So, God chose David to be King. God knew humans are superficial, and looks matter to us, we expect our heroes to be handsome. And as kings go, David was handsome, and he was successful. He was a great king, his name for centuries ever after was held in the highest regard. 'Son of David' was one of the greatest compliments you could give an Israelite. David was the great hero King of the people of Israel. A great king. But fatally flawed.

Choosing a handsome boy to be king was God working with human ways rather than putting his stamp of approval on them, God working with human ways and subtly but pointedly drawing our attention to how foolish those ways are. In the end, David's good looks might have helped speed him on his way, but they proved little use to him when life became more complex: they didn't stop his first wife hating him or his sons rebelling against him nor did they protect David from God's anger when he committed adultery and murder. They didn't guarantee success for his dynasty: it found itself a few centuries later humiliated, destroyed and exiled by the Babylonian boot boys. In the end, David's face wasn't his fortune: his handsomeness was in the greater scheme of things neither here nor there. All the more important then to draw attention to it right at the beginning of the tale we heard today to better emphasise its futility later on. However handsome the hero, like all human heroes David had feet of clay. *All of our heroes have feet of clay, and David ended his life with pretty much all the garden on his sandals. All of our heroes have feet of clay. It can't really be any other way, because right at the beginning God took clay and breathed into it and our ancestor came into being.*

In the tale of King David, that greatest swashbuckling tale of the glory days of the kingdom of Israel, what made the crucial difference was not David's relationship with other people- for which his looks would undoubtedly have helped- but his relationship with God, where his looks were irrelevant. The rise and fall of King David and his successors was entirely in the hands of God. In God's hands were the victories. In God's hands were the tragedies. Those hands were guarding, correcting, consoling, protecting, caressing. They were not pulling the strings of puppet playthings so icily imagined by the Greeks of their gods, the gods who *would* be swayed by a handsome Ganymede or a beautiful Europa.

God chose a handsome king so we'd take notice. And we did. And the God made sure we would never forget how unimportant David's looks were.