

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Are You Growing?

Yes - round the midriff...but as a person? I feel a bit guilty even asking the question, because it seems almost selfish. The tenor of many lives is so tough, so engaged - looking after children, slogging away at a hard job, taking care of an elderly or sick relative, or worrying about someone who seems to be at risk: most of us have this maelstrom pounding away at our weatherproofing (don't think parish priests are immune!). To find time amidst the sound and fury to ask whether we are personally developing and growing seems almost irresponsible, even selfish. Look at our faces, and you will see the signs. William Blake wrote of the faces of London:

*I wander thro' each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, carks of woe.*

This reading of faces is deeply moving. What is written there as life unfolds? Is there another page somewhere else, which might contradict the etching of time in our face? Is there an alternative version?

The Beauty Of Age

Great artists have eloquently drawn our attention to the beauty of the human face, just in this fact of bearing the marks of a life lived. Rembrandt's series of self-portraits mercilessly tell his story, and in each canvas he is accepting, almost taking responsibility for, the face he shows us. Orwell said that at 50 everyone has the face he deserves. I'm much more interested in the way in which people's faces speak to us, and training my eye to read correctly. We all do this, but we don't *know* we're doing it; it never gets put into words. I know old people racked with arthritic pain whose faces bear the signs of a perennial sweetness; their suffering, despite being endless and unrelieved, has not robbed them of love. The wrinkles that come from readiness to smile are quite other than the ones induced by a lifetime of smirks or grimaces. The serious forehead of the diligent thinker and planner is clearly distinguishable from that of selfish pride and habitual condemnation. It seems stupid to suggest that

the eyes could actually be altered by the things they have looked at; yet I really believe they are. There are strange kinships between faces; the calm gaze of a young face that still seeks simply for beauty and joy has something in common with the gnarled eye of a seasoned artist, as he fixes his eye on his subject and jabs in with the charcoal. The frightened, darting look of a child in a war-zone risks turning into the numbed cipher of the child in the terrible orphanages of the Eastern bloc. Our face is a canvas.

Death-masks

Every now and again we run up against one of these plaster-casts of the great, and find ourselves glimpsing the final form of faces that changed the world. *To you all flesh will come, with its burden of sin; too heavy for us, our offences: but you wash them away.* In the face of dying and dead people we can see both the mark of mortality and the face of a little child. I think of their unimaginable encounter with God, who reads human hearts with infallible wisdom. How unsearchable is that prospect! The only description we have is of total bemusement on our part; we don't know what our Judge is talking about (*When did we see you hungry?*). God reads our whole lives with infinite compassion, and the intent of confirming what he has made in us. The gains and losses we see in our biography are not so to God; he has uses for the empty spaces in our account of ourselves, and he sees our failings through the loving eyes of an eternal Father. At the same time, what we count as our victories and achievements may seem of slight importance to One who is only looking for goodness and truth.

God Is A Gardener

- "who stunts tall trees and makes the low ones grow." He puts down the mighty, and raises the humble. Perhaps we might seek a share in his wisdom, as we are given the privilege of looking into one another's eyes. To see clearly is to be filled with charity. To know how to help others to grow is the great art. God, show us your mercy! *Fr Philip*