

In God's Image – A Reflection by St John's parishioner, Colin Davey

There was a review in *Radio Times* (RT) recently of *Goodfellas*, which, wedged into a corner, simply read: "Brutal Mafia epic". All you need to know about this film – and several other five-star movies in the genre – is encapsulated in those three well-chosen words. Asteroids and Church aside, mass does not necessarily add impact.

I'm less impressed with RT's handling of imagery. Just try and find a picture in RT that's not of a person. Presenters obscuring spectacular places is a particular theme. Okay, there's the occasional animal, planet or classic car ripe for profitable, if jeopardous, restoration, but in general RT is cover to cover faces. They are making an assumption about what engages their readership, or are at least complicit in that assumption. The American sociopolitical commentator Noam Chomsky suggested that tabloid journalism exists in order that the so-called 'working classes' aren't told anything important. In compounding what is clearly a badly skewed cultural value, the focus on the individual as celebrity, even our dear RT potentially strays into similar criticism.

Things step up a gear once we leave the relative safety of RT and clamber into the skip that is social media, the Romper Room of the self-captured image. Typically, online celebrity is about getting as many people as possible to know what you, and your supposedly perfect life, look like: a digitally sanitised face and figure that can be monetarised through evoking a willingness to imitate, to click, to like. At worst, comic-book supervillains, created not by radioactivity but toxic masculinity, false prophets spreading fake news in return for advertising revenue. Whether there's any enduring skill or talent underwriting that thirst for attention and approval seems almost irrelevant, and indeed at the root of its fragility (it's no coincidence that a castle's weakest point is its gift shop).

Now, wouldn't it be odd if there were someone who is known worldwide for their community-focussed, message-driven good works, with substantially more followers than even the most prominent social media glitterati, yet we have no idea what they look like (and I don't mean Banksy). Despite the lack of first-hand evidence, Jesus has nonetheless attained a consensus appearance that is instantly recognisable even out of context; we might even remark of someone with shoulder-length dark hair and beard that they "look like Jesus", robe and sandals notwithstanding. But more than that, Jesus is often – not always, but often – depicted as a handsome young man. Are we in the same ballpark of superficiality here, albeit one with less contemporary, commercial origins? Is Jesus attractively depicted simply because we wouldn't otherwise value his image, and message, as much? Would we overlook the product because of the branding, be less willing to follow?

We have surely inherited an element of the romantic aesthetic, just as we see with images of Mary, an allegory of purity and goodness diametrically opposed to the earthy, bestial devil lurking among the fire or shadows. Unlike celebrity, we are not looking at the orange surface but at the sacred heart, the inner beauty shining through. Perhaps there's also a suggestion of rebirth in Jesus' illuminated perfection, a promise of remaining youthful in eternity or reattaining youth for those of us whom time has squeezed like a lemon, short on juice and pip, six-pack long since buried beneath a layer of biscuits. What we must be careful not to do is to consider this Teflon image incompatible with finding Jesus where he is at work, among the destitute and disenfranchised, among the dust and rubble. There's also a practical angle: in art, it's easier to pick out the tall handsome subject from the gathered crowd and, let's face it, tall handsome people are listened to (although the apparently short-statured, less than eye-candy St Paul offers a convincing exception to that rule!).

It could be easy to consider the Church as not only rooted in the past but also relegated to it. Updates in text and imagery, whether active or passive, help to bridge that gap, to remind us that we are the unbroken body of the Church, the present-day face of Jesus. However, we must interpret those changes objectively, lest they become instruments of discord. Crucially, the issue is not the depiction, but the projection of our flawed contemporary values onto it. RT, among other cultural barometers, has led us astray. Ultimately, that Jesus is depicted as handsome is a meaningful shorthand, an astute and succinct encapsulation of his message, an essence of truth, just like that three-word film review.

PS: When I showed this reflection to my partner Katrin, her review stretched to four words, simply: "Not your best work". Oh well.