

2nd May 2021

Appearance

“For the Lord seeth not as man seeth: for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

Bible, 1 Samuel 16:7

Joseph Carey Merrick (also known as John Merrick) was a 19th century Englishman known for having severe deformities. He began to develop abnormalities before the age of five (though the exact cause of his deformities remains unclear) and he was exhibited at freak-shows as “The Elephant Man”. His life was depicted in a 1979 play by Bernard Pomerance and in a 1980 movie by David Lynch, both titled *The Elephant Man*. Tom Norman, who exhibited Merrick as a freak, would introduce him thus:

Ladies and gentlemen ... I would like to introduce Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man ... I ask you please to prepare yourselves. Brace yourselves up to witness ... probably the most remarkable human being ever to draw the breath of life.

There is no doubt that Merrick was a remarkable figure, and much has been made and written about his life. But what did he think himself? I was amazed when I discovered that, in ending his letters, Merrick would regularly quote words adapted from a poem, *False Greatness*, by a renowned hymn-writer of a previous century, the great Isaac Watts.

*‘Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God.
Could I create myself anew,
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole,
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul,
The mind’s the standard of the man.*

The bible reminds us that while we are concerned about the “outward appearance”, our God looks “on the heart.” Merrick, despite living with his own deformities, knew that. The measurement of the state of one’s soul, or the standard of one’s mind, mattered more. Would that the people who viewed him as a freak would have known that too.

A prayer for today

Loving God, if you look on my heart and my soul and not my appearance, help me not to judge others by what I see, but to look on their hearts for love. Amen