

28th September 2021

Doleful

“El Caballero de la Triste Figura.”

“The Knight of the Doleful Countenance.”

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote

I was discussing with a minister friend a while ago how important it is to stay cheerful even when things are tough, and he remarked, “The trouble is, I know too many people – ministers included – who have the kind of doleful expression that could turn water into vinegar!” I smiled, because I knew the people to whom he was referring and recalled another comment from years before describing someone who had “the kind of face that would make milk curdle”. I could see in my mind’s eye every “Knight of the Doleful Countenance” I’d ever met. I smiled ... and was the better for it.

We’ve been living through trying times. The “doleful countenance” has been much in evidence. My wife tells me I wear a frown on my face more often than I should. *I* tell her I’m concentrating. *She* tells me I’m frowning. We might both be right. But the truth is, for a moment at least, a “doleful countenance” has been too much in evidence.

The 17th century English woman of letters, poet and dramatist, Elizabeth Tanfield Carey, penned these lines in *The Tragedy of Mariam*:

*I know I could enchain him with a smile,
and lead him captive with a gentle word ...*

While I wouldn’t wish to “enchain” anyone with a smile, far less lead an unsuspecting hearer captive by any gentle word I might offer, perhaps if I smiled more, then more doleful countenances than mine might be chased away. I would never subscribe to the “Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag, and smile, smile, smile” school of thought. Doleful countenances have their place, as tragedies befall us, and sadness feels overwhelming. But, nonetheless, a smile can work wonders when it is offered, and maybe it should be utilised more than it is.

Rather than Cervantes’ “Knight of the Doleful Countenance”, I might then be better described as someone who, in Walter Scott’s words, was known for offering “the tribute of a smile”.

A prayer for today

*Lord, if you smile on me with your love, shouldn't I try a little harder
to pass that love on in a smile for other people?*