

4th September 2021

Popularity

“Or art thou base, common and popular?”

William Shakespeare, Henry V

When invited to comment on the character of the Victorian poet and literary critic, W E Henley, Oscar Wilde is reputed to have said: “He has fought a good fight and has had to face every difficulty except popularity.” Wilde, while not dismissing his contemporary as “base” or “common”, certainly didn’t consider him to be in any way “popular”.

With the rise of “celebrity status” in our modern culture, it’s worth looking at our attitudes to popularity. George Henry Lewes, the 19th century theatre critic, wrote in *The Spanish Drama*, “To some ... popularity is always suspicious. Enjoying none themselves, they are prone to suspect the validity of those attainments which command it.” Is that true? Do we look on popularity with suspicion because we don’t enjoy such popularity ourselves? And might we consider popularity with disdain because we feel it’s not really deserved? Both might be true, and, in my more cynical moments, they are for me. I can be jealous of the popularity of others because such recognition has passed me by. And I have said often enough, especially in the area of celebrity status, “Why is *that* person so popular?”

But rather than looking at the negative side of popularity – or the negative that is in me – why don’t we look at the positive side? Think on these two things: If someone is popular because of the pleasure they bring to others, or attitudes they’ve changed in us for the better, or because of charitable or altruistic work, isn’t such popularity to be valued? And if we are envious of such popularity, might this spur us on to live better lives?

And, what of those who never seek or find popularity? One of this summer’s Olympic medallists has said that it’s not just what you do in the public gaze that matters, but what you do “in the shadows”. Let’s value the good work that goes on “behind the scenes”, which may not translate itself into “popularity”, but is certainly worth celebrating. Those of us who will never achieve “celebrity status” can look in the mirror and know that the cheers ringing in our heads are for the work we know we’ve done well. For most of us, thank God, that’s popularity enough.

A prayer for today

Lord, today I look you in the eye, and know that doing my best is OK with you. Amen

An original reflection by @ Tom Gordon

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