

27th October 2021

Frown

**“For kings have cares that wait upon a crown,
And cares can make the sweetest love to frown.”**

Robert Greene, The shepherd's wife's song (1590)

Half-way up the west arch of the crossing in Iona Abbey, directly below the Bell Tower, there's a carving of a figure with a twisted face. Its sharp features are distinctly human, and these features are distinctly twisted. There are no corresponding carvings on any of the other Bell Tower arches. So why this one, and why has it been placed where it is?

The twisted face is angled to stare at the spot where, some say, the medieval pulpit was located. So it could represent a soul in torment, a reminder of the preacher's responsibility to rescue the souls of unbelievers from the eternal torment that awaits them. Or, in a more pragmatic sense, in a dimly lit Abbey, where people's faces couldn't be clearly seen, it might be a representation of how someone's face could be twisted in torment if a sermon was tedious, over-long, or hard to understand.

But as I sat in the nave of the Abbey and looked through the crossing, over the congregation seated in the choirstalls, to the east window and the marble Table set for Communion, I had this thought: What if the face isn't tormented, but simply frowning? And what if it isn't looking only at the worship leader but was staring out over the whole congregation? *All* of us are then under its frowning gaze.

Might this, therefore, be the frown of God, a heavenly gaze that falls on those gathered for worship? Is it questioning our commitment to environmental justice, passions for peace and equity, appetites for healing and wholeness, offerings of compassion and selfless action? And is this the face of a God who watches me taking all that's on offer – symbolised in the Sacrament I'll receive – and frowns with anxiety at *me*? Might God's heavenly cares have made the “sweetest love to frown” again?

As I left the Abbey Church, the face was still set in a frown, a permanent reminder of how God keeps gazing on me as I travel between my worship and my living. But I pray that, from time to time, as God keeps watching me, the face might even yet break into a smile.

A prayer for today

A frown of disapproval? A smile of encouragement?

I know which one I need from my God today.