

28<sup>th</sup> September 2022

## Warts

“Glad to see you, sir,” said Mr. Peggotty.  
“You’ll find us rough, sir, but you’ll find us ready.”

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

My reflections on misquotations earlier this month took me to a phrase I’ve clearly misquoted all my life – as you might have done too. It’s a popular summary of Oliver Cromwell’s instructions to the Court painter, Lely, not to beautify his painting. It may be an oft-quoted and pithy shorthand, but Cromwell *never* instructed the artist to paint him, “warts and all”. Instead, this is how Horace Walpole recorded the event more fully in *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, in 1763:

*Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not to flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me; otherwise, I shall never pay a farthing for it.*

I like that! And there are two sides to this approach – whether the words are misquoted or not. The first is that any organisation, social, commercial, charitable, political, religious, or whatever – and, indeed, any person – should be open to constructive observation, such as Cromwell was encouraging in his painter. How are positive changes to be affected and betterment found unless we are open to those who “say what they see”, out of a deep concern for what is right and good? Too often we can become defensive in the face of criticism or seek to encourage flattery and sycophancy such that we never hear negative things. Shouldn’t we be aware that, if others see our “pimples, warts and everything”, they might be drawing attention to things we have failed to accept for ourselves?

And the second is this: are we willing to be a Cromwell, “rough and ready” (as Dickens’ Mr Peggotty would have it) in the sense that we own, accept and understand our flaws even *before* others need point them out to us? We are what we are, “warts and all”, so isn’t it better to work on knowing that and coming to terms with it, without others ignoring our faults and giving us signals that we’re pretty close to being perfect?

“Remark all these roughnesses”, Cromwell suggests. Openness, honesty, reality from both sitter and painter was the order of the day. And that’s surely worth much more than a farthing in anyone’s money.

### A prayer for today

*If “I am accepted” by my God, shouldn’t I also accept myself? Amen*