

22nd August 2023

Hypocrisy

**"A man I knew who lived upon a smile,
And well it fed him; he looked plump and fair,
While rankest venom foamed through every vein."**

Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*

We all know hypocrisy when we see it, when someone feigns "to be what one is not or to believe what one does not." One dictionary definition includes "the sin of pretending to virtue or goodness". We are faced with hypocrisy when people advocate behaviours they don't practice, or espouse righteous causes out of a desire for praise rather than out of genuinely laudable motivations. We are quick, therefore – and, perhaps, rightly so – to point out hypocrisy when we see it in others. But what of ourselves? What, as Jesus suggests, about the beam in our own eye when we criticise the speck of dust in someone else's?

This came to mind a while back when I was in conversation with my clinical supervisor. I don't consider myself a hypocrite – at least I hope I'm not – and I certainly don't have Edward Young's "rankest venom" flowing through my veins. But in my conversation, I was undoubtedly a hypocrite. I was giving the *impression* I was listening. I can do that! I can be one of those who lives "upon a smile". But, in truth, my mind was really somewhere else, and my body language betrayed my hypocrisy. "You're not really here, are you?" my supervisor asked. And she was right. I wasn't! My smile *tried* to indicate I was engaged in our conversation. But she was wise enough to identify hypocrisy when she saw it – and to tell me so. It was an enlightening – and formative – experience.

I can still get it wrong. Wise friends and family members will point it out when it happens. I'm still learning – and I apologise now to anyone reading this who's been a victim of this little bit of hypocrisy in me.

But I hope, like me, you are still learning too. I'm sure you don't have rankest venom in your veins, any more than I do. But if, from time to time, you have "lived upon a smile" and have communicated that you're "plump and fair" while you're really being something else, then, like me, dealing with this hypocrisy will always be very important.

A prayer for today

Lord, help me to be honest and open with you, even when my false behaviour doesn't allow me to be as honest and open with myself and others as I should be. Amen