

Deservedly Famous. The Bishop's Pastoral Letter for March 2019

True celebrities and icons of our time.

Q: 'What are you famous for?' A: 'I'm famous for being famous'.

'Famous for being famous' is a phrase which sums up one of the more empty dimensions of our contemporary culture rather well. It refers to somebody who is well-known not because of any particular talent, achievement or position, but simply because she or he is well-known. So pervasive is this celebration of celebrity culture for its own sake that we could all think of people in that category, much as we might to pretend that we cannot. Oddly enough, many such celebrities first appearances were on what is called 'reality TV' – which is in fact a depiction of events about as far removed from normal reality as it is possible to get. And another word which is pressed into the distorted service of fame for fame's sake is 'icon', meaning a representative symbol of some enthusiasm or aspiration: 'icon of empowerment', 'icon of style', 'icon of youth', 'icon of and so on' – Wikipedia will give you plenty of answers as to which famous celebrity belongs where.

If all that is part of popular contemporary culture, then our faith asks us to be profoundly counter-cultural, and we can see that in the way we as Christians use words like 'reality', 'icon', 'celebrity'. The reality in which we are called to live is one in which our extraordinary God inhabits, blesses and transforms the very ordinary, everyday things of life. It is a reality of repeated acts of kindness and care, constant glimpses of the holy breaking through into the secular, unremarkable men and women becoming temples of the Holy Spirit. I come across this down-to-earth-lifted-to-heaven reality in churches and communities across our diocese, and it is far more absorbing and interesting than any TV show.

And what are icons in this reality? They are pictures of those in whom the light of God shines, images of what our humanity looks like when it is restored to the likeness of the One who created us. I have many icons in my house. A few are representations of canonised saints, and they remind me of the great communion of holy ones across time and space who pray with me and for me. But most are photographs of family, friends, colleagues, and they too hold before my eyes the networks of love and care that accompany and encourage me on my journey. Well-known or obscure, all these icons are of people whose life is hid with Christ in God, and they mean more to me than anybody posing as a symbol of any fashion.

And who are our celebrities? They are people whose contributions are often hidden from public notice, who commit themselves to serving their neighbours, loving their God, and showing the fruits of the Spirit in their lives. You will know many such people in your own churches, and you will know that these are the people who really do deserve to be famous – but, of course, they would not be the people they are if they wanted to be known for being famous. They are the people Jesus described as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and without them the world would be a dark and unsavoury place. They are people who, like our first bishop St Chad, 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God'. And at our St Chad's celebration this year, on 4th March at our Cathedral, I will be presenting seven of them with the first awards of our new St Chad's Medal, given to recognise devoted service of God and neighbour by people in our diocese. These are our celebrities indeed. **+Michael** Bishop of Lichfield