



### **Mirror, Mirror: Through a Glass Darkly**

*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor.13:12-13)*

We all remember the magic mirror belonging to the evil queen in the fairytale, *Snow White*. Each day the queen would position herself in front of the mirror and ask, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?” And the mirror would reply, “You are, O Queen.” The queen would be reassured for the moment, content in the mirror’s lie and its acquiescence to her vanity.

Throughout history, the mirror has been one of the most prevalent and potent metaphors for the folly of human vanity. One of the foundational Western myths, for example, is the story of Narcissus who fell helplessly in love with himself when he discovered his reflection in a woodland pond. Today we, too, seem to be obsessed with our own images. We seek a variety of “mirrors” and, usually, we’re very happy to have them “lie” to us, to provide a false reflection to prop up our insecurities. We wouldn’t think of leaving the house without first checking ourselves in the mirror. Lifts in buildings have mirrored walls so we can pass the time by looking at ourselves as we ascend or descend. We spend countless billions on lotions and potions in attempts to beautify ourselves and to ward off the aging process. Beauty and youth are idolised in glossy magazines and on the big and small screen, and the way to happiness is often touted as being as easy as a few deft swipes of the plastic surgeon’s knife. The idea is that we’re only as worthwhile as our outward appearance. If we don’t look good, we cannot be happy. In this way, the mirror is powerful because we allow it to have power.

However, when St Paul says that “we see in a mirror dimly” he is not simply cautioning us about the pitfalls of vanity; he is reminding us about our inability to see

clearly, and truly, in the world. He is pointing to our human tendency to be absorbed in ephemeral things and to be deluded into believing that they are all that matters. Here we see only a part of the whole, a tiny portion of the infinite completeness that is God.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century English mystic, Walter Hilton, in his text *The Scale of Perfection* writes of the need to open the “eye of the heart”. He says that when the eyes of the heart open to the knowledge of God, a “reform” in faith and feeling is achieved and true contemplation has begun. He goes on to explain, following St Paul, that “we do not contemplate the things that are seen but rather those we cannot see; for the things that are seen are temporal, but those that are not seen are eternal (2.33:201). This is what St Paul is highlighting for us: in the world we think that we see what is real, but it’s only a tiny, and inadequate, reflection of the whole. The things that are really worth “seeing” are those that cannot be seen with our physical eyes. The true contemplative, as Thomas Merton reminds us, “is not the man [or woman] who has fiery visions of the cherubim carrying God on their imagined chariot, but simply he who has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust ...”

Beyond the illusion, behind the mirror, is where we must look to find our true self, and where we will see the face of God.

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