

ME—OR YOUR LYING EYES?

This past January, we went to a fascinating exhibit at the Morgan Library in New York dedicated to the life and work of the library's first director—who had also been J P Morgan's personal librarian—a woman named Belle da Costa Green. She was an extraordinary person who also happened to be black. But she passed as white, which is what allowed her to succeed in a segregated and deeply racist society.

The exhibition featured lots of photographs of her. Yet as I looked at them, it was clear to me that she was black. But was that because I knew this before I even went to the library?

Closer to home, a couple of weeks ago, the Ontario-based author Thomas King admitted he has no Indigenous heritage. Many leaders in First Nations communities had been saying so for years but because King also "passed"—that is, he "looked" Indigenous—most people took him at face value, as it were. The astonishing thing is, I read some comments online and a number of them said things like, "He doesn't look Indigenous. I would have said Japanese or Mexican."

My mother once went to see Liberace with a friend. They loved Mr Entertainment's razzmatazz. And, having no understanding—or experience—of camp, they simply accepted him as a flashy entertainer who lived and dressed luxuriously. Not to mention that Mom's experience of gay people at that point was zero. That is, if you don't count four-year-old me at home who'd already developed a taste for drama and bling!

All of which proves that we see what we want to see.

The trouble is, in an information and internet age, so much of what we see is curated to catch our eye and show us what we want. Yet we know that some of what we see is fake. Generative AI is increasingly being used—weaponized?—for nefarious purposes. Sure, we hear about things being fact-checked, but we only care when we don't like what we're seeing. Or when it forces us to take a second look at ourselves.

A friend recently recommended Isabel Wilkerson's book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. In it, she shines a merciless light on the systems of racism which have defined us for generations. She knows we don't want to look at our shameful history. But, in a lecture given at McGill this past October, she said, "It's my belief that we

cannot fix what we cannot see, and we cannot cure disease unless we have diagnosed it.”

Yet this morning we heard “He shall *not* judge by what his eyes see.” That’s the sort of thing nice, progressive folks like us say. But we *do* need to judge by what our eyes see. At least, we do if this world is going to become more like the kingdom. “I don’t see colour,” we hear—and even say. But of course we do. How can we not? To pretend we don’t is to actually participate in the erasure of people of colour.

Not only that, but to say we don’t see colour is a means of avoiding the collective guilt we carry around. Now, we don’t want to look too closely into history because we’re afraid of what we’ll find. What we’ll see in ourselves. It’s far safer to pretend we’re above all that. We’ve evolved. We’re woke.

But we’re not like blindfolded Lady Justice—an image derived from biblical models, such as the one we heard this morning from Isaiah. He’s speaking about what the Messiah will be like and how when he comes, he’ll rule in perfect righteousness and with perfect equity. Which will reverse the disorder of this world and restore the lost paradise of the Garden.

Except this vision of Isaiah—usually referred to as “The Peaceable Kingdom”—is just that: a vision. For we still live in a world that’s not at peace with itself, and though we decry the social problems of the day, we also don’t want to see the injustices that are all around. We refuse to look. We turn aside. We retreat into sheltered enclaves. All the while telling ourselves, “I’m not to blame for all this. I’d like to help, but what can I do? The gods help those who help themselves.”

Lady Justice may be blindfolded, but we’re blind—by deliberate choice.

Not only that, for too long we’ve passed for Christians. We’ve claimed a heritage that isn’t rightfully ours. We’ve even made the faith into a kind of vacuous, empty diversion. All the while we moved through the world with a kind of noblesse oblige and paid lip service to the values of the kingdom.

For generations, people believed us. Those who didn’t were ignored. But now that the Christian brand—if you can call it that—has been sullied by craven charlatans and vacuous virtue signallers, the truth is out. People can see that we’re not who we said we were.

Like how we said we were prophetic. The trouble is, true prophets haven’t usually been cosy with the powers-that-be, nor have they dressed in the latest fashions and flashed megawatt smiles. Though they have sometimes used our sacred story for their own end.

You see, true prophets are more like John: wild, unpredictable, figures on the fringe. But even more often, they’re stealthier figures who move among us and open our eyes

to see the humanity in people who've traditionally been ostracized and misunderstood. Who teach us that the judgment of an open heart is even more reliable than the witness of an open eye. Who point us away from our realm of limited vision and partial equity to one of wholeness and perfection.

And to a God who's seen the truth all along. The truth that the world is good and we're beautiful and worth saving. The truth that can only be seen with the eyes of faith which perceive that we're saved not in fiery judgement but by innocence revealed in the crèche and at Calvary.

In Dorothy Sayers's, *The Man Born to be King*, a beggar meets Jesus and says to him, "I never set eyes on your face before. Faces mean nothing to me. But you look the way you ought to look if you're the man I take you for."

He saw what was important. He saw God before him. Do we? You see, the One this holy season enjoins us to wait for is already here. It's just that he's awfully hard to see behind the lights and excess and extravagance.

But behind all that there's a gift that must be seen to be believed.