

In today's world image is all-important. There's everything from carefully crafted (male) designer stubble to the latest fashionable (female) slim line figure. As for perfect looks and model appearance we have the celebrities and glossy magazines constantly to hand. What happens, however, when you see yourself like me slowly emerging as a greying middle-aged cleric with an ever-expanding church extension stomach difficult to keep under control? If truth were told, most of us don't conform to the stereotyped images constantly thrown in our faces. Just as well.

And then there are the ideal homes filled with the most beautiful colour co-ordinations, expensive furnishings, sophisticated gadgetry, pristine kitchens and luxurious bathrooms. Nothing out of place, not even the neatly embroidered cushion with the words, "Home, sweet home." Again, of course, totally like our home... or maybe not!

Brands and badges matter. Parents have to dig ever deeper into their pockets to satisfy the label mania of their children. How did children cope without mobile phones and play stations?

Style rather than substance would appear to be increasingly part of the political process as well. I read a fascinating article in "Engage" magazine about the 1996 American presidential election. Bill Clinton's political strategist persuaded him to sideline major policy initiatives and to concentrate on the small-scale concerns of middle-class America and, even more importantly, to reflect back to them through his interests, lifestyle, clothing and favourite brands, their own preferences. The president went hunting, did DIY and engaged in other "regular" activities and, in the process, turned the electorate around. New Labour emulated this in Britain and "consumer politics" was born.

This brings me to the question as to how today's image-makers would market Jesus. Softly, softly perhaps with neat little soundbites about being kind and gentle, turning the other cheek or doing a good turn. Certainly style artists have made a good job of marketing the cross as a nice fashionable accessory.

In many ways there was nothing attractive about Jesus, "nothing to cause us to take a second look. One look at him and people turned away. We looked down on him, thought he was scum" (Isaiah 53, "The Message"). He was despised and rejected, alienating many as he threw the spotlight on sin and hypocrisy. His teaching was often full of warning and judgment. His body was twisted and bruised as He agonised on Calvary's tree. Before all that He spoke to his followers about taking up the cross and following him.

Yes, it's true that Jesus offers a welcome and the warm embrace of loving understanding as we come to Him. As Easter approaches, once again we celebrate His victory, the hope and assurance He brings as we give our lives to him. It's good to be reminded also that the Christian life brings with it the cutting edge of total commitment. More than image, it has to do with the heart!

*Happy Easter! - Charles McMullen*