***Dr Who***

**Series 8 episode 1 Deep Breath**

Dr Who has always played with theological themes, even if these themes are not specifically tied to anything religious.

This is perhaps inevitable, given that the Doctor is a being who can be anywhere in time and space, is one who comes back from the dead, and is always saving the world, especially planet Earth and its inhabitants. In addition, the Doctor’s companions are often like disciples or followers who trust in him, learn from him and believe that he will always save them and believe that he will always return.

In this first episode of a new series with Peter Capaldi as an older Doctor, there are important themes which have significance for the theologically-minded. They include the concept of ‘face’ and appearance as balanced against how we love, trust, judge, follow and believe in people as persons, irrespective of what they look like or appear to be.

The new Doctor emerges confused and disoriented from the TARDIS. Nothing makes sense to him, and throughout the episode he has to begin to try to make sense of who he is and what is going on. His face doesn’t fit. He says the mirror is ‘furious’ and that ‘someone frowned me this face’ and that his eyebrows have an independent life. This confusion is made worse by the fact that his companion, Clara, doesn’t recognise him. Her main problem seems to be that she was used to the young Matt Smith incarnation of the Doctor and this older, grey-haired, lined Doctor with the Scottish accent, cannot be the same person and have the same feeling for her.

Parallel to this, we see the Silurian lizard-being Madame Vastra wearing her veil to disguise what humans call her ‘disfigurement’. She talks to Clara about the veil not being there to conceal her but to separate her from human stupidity and judgement. Madame Vastra is loved by the maid Jenny and there is no veil between them. They are married and see each for whom the other truly is. This is summed up when Madame Vastra helps Jenny by breathing oxygen into her and by Jenny’s casual acceptance of Vastra’s messy food requirements. Madame Vastra and Clara have a conversation about faces and disguises which begins with Madame Vastra wearing her veil and by the end not wearing it. When Clara asks when she took it off, Madame Vastra replies ‘when you stopped seeing it’.

Similarly, Strax, the Sontaran nurse ‘butler’, examining Clara during a ‘mandatory health check’ has trouble seeing Clara as a whole person, rather than a collection of parts and is confused about her gender. This is mirrored in the cyborg monsters of the episode, who also see the Doctor and Clara as a collection of body parts (heart, lung, spleen) to be harvested for remaking their decaying human bodies. The Doctor shows that faces are not the person when he tears off a robot’s face of human skin and himself wears one of them as a mask.

To be alive, means to breathe and to eat and to form relationships. These are things the cyborgs cannot do and yet they long for the essential elements that make humans human. The Doctor is sorry for the being of the dinosaur which is harvested and then burned for the cyborg’s needs and whose lonely lament in the middle of Thames before it burns he translates for Clara. There is then a question about what it means to be alive as a being and what it means to be dead, to be reduced merely to ash or to a collection of decaying parts. The Doctor confronts the node cyborg about its behaviour, and the cyborg says that its behaviour has meaning: it is trying to reach the Promised Land. The Doctor insists that this is a human superstition which the cyborg has somehow absorbed from its human flesh but the cyborg insists that ‘paradise’ is real and that is what it is trying to reach. In their struggle, the cyborg says it cannot kill itself and asks the Doctor whether he is going to kill it. The cyborg ends up dead, but how is not resolved. What is strange, is that we see the cyborg awaken in another place, addressed by a peculiar and perhaps rather sinister person called ‘Missy’ who welcomes him to the Promised Land, a garden full of flowers, which she calls ‘heaven’.

Back in the TARDIS, Clara still has problems with whether she can believe in this new Doctor and follow him. Wavering on the edge of rejection she receives a phone call from the previous Doctor on the edge of his death, asking her to trust in him and to help him. On the strength of this familiar voice and their old relationship she agrees to go with the new Doctor and puts her arms round him.

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*Some thoughts for Christians...*

One of the things that this might remind us of is that when Jesus was resurrected from the dead his friends did not recognise him or even believe that he could be the same person. It took something else to happen; something which restored the relationship between them for them to be sure that this was Jesus. Something had to happen which allowed Jesus’s friends to follow him and to tell others of his resurrection, certain that he was alive and the saviour of the world. What does it take to recognise the ‘face’ of Christ and also for us to be regarded as friends by this resurrected Jesus? What do we believe about the veil of this world which will be stripped away when we finally encounter God. And how many veils do we place between ourselves and other human beings, who are different from us and perhaps not easy to understand. And why do we believe in a Promised Land, a heaven, where we will be finally seen face to face?