

“We Wish to See Jesus”: Sermon for March 21, 2010 by Wendy Marble

Scripture: Colossians 1: 15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Here God is making visible the invisible. Here Jesus is the fulcrum of these two worlds, earth and heaven, material and spiritual, visible and invisible.

God created male and female in His image. Then he took it one step further, He brought His image to us in Jesus, in whom God was “pleased to have his fullness dwell.”

Jesus, the one through whom all things were created. The one who holds it all together. The one who reconciles all things, including us, to God.

Is it any wonder, then, that for 2,000 years, followers of Jesus have been trying to determine what Jesus looked like?

His appearance remains a mystery. The apostles left no written description. Yet Jesus’ face is the most recognizable in Western art. The reason for this is simple: for hundreds of years both the reality and the meaning of Christ’s life and death were the main preoccupation of nearly everyone in the Western world and beyond. And in the middle of all that thought and doubt and faith and action, and even politics and power, is the artist trying to render and reconcile Jesus’ essential qualities of both divinity and humanity.

God and Man, sinlessness and suffering, how do you portray that in one face? The history of the theologians and the artists who followed their direction in this challenge was not an easy one.

In the beginning, the horrors of crucifixion were too fresh, too contemporary, especially during the time of Christian persecutions, for our young church to use it as an identifying symbol of Jesus. More common was the use of symbols like the fish we are so familiar with, the Greek ICHTHUS which stood for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. Other letter combinations signaled other aspects of Christ, as well as the symbols of the Lion, the Lamb, and the Eucharist.

Christ's ministry took place among Jews who, because of the second commandment (do you remember which one that is? "You shall make no idols" or "graven images") were suspicious of portraying the human body. But Greek and Roman influence inspired the catacomb artists to introduce figures like the Good Shepherd and the Fisher of Souls to represent Jesus.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine chose Christianity as the state religion, suddenly there was a need for public places of worship, liturgical objects for the sacraments, and images that would illustrate the beliefs of the church for the pagan Roman Empire. What was out there, visually and artistically, for church leaders to draw from and for craftsmen to reproduce? There was the over-the-top court style of the Emperor, whose clothing and thrones and palaces were made of the finest materials. God's house deserved no less. The altar in these new worship spaces was built to remind believers of the table of the Last Supper. (We reflect a bit of this Byzantine style in our church this morning: the altar also symbolized God's presence or body, and so it would be "dressed" in the richest cloth. The original altar design had five legs; each would have a cross carved on the corner, which is why our paraments often have small crosses on each side.) In magnificent frescoes and mosaics, Jesus was portrayed as stern and strong, even grim, marked by suffering, politically supreme, the King of the World. After all, the Scriptures say, in Isaiah chapter 53 that the Suffering Servant "had not form or comeliness that we would be attracted to him." In other words, Jesus was an ugly man.

The most compelling visuals of the time, however, were found in the art of Greece, with its many gods and its portrayal of human beauty as a reflection of the ideal man, reasonable and self-contained. In the spirit of assimilation, God began to be shown as bearded and fearsome, like Zeus. Jesus was pictured as youthful, beardless and upright, like Apollo, the most beautiful of the gods. These artisans could point to Psalm 45 which describes the Messiah as "fairer than the children of men." Wasn't Christ without sin or blemish, perfect, radiating God's brilliance?

By the year 692 AD, the Church had decided that Jesus must be portrayed as human instead of as something else from among the dozens of symbols that had sprung up in worship centers. At the Quinisext Council meeting they wrote of this decision, "so that we may contemplate the sublime humility of the Word made Flesh."

They're trying to resolve a conflict, you see, but right away it just got worse. Which aspect of Christ should the church put at the top of the list? In other words, what should Jesus look like? Should he be portrayed as the Christ in his earthly ministry, like the illustrations in our childhood bibles? Or as the Suffering Christ (thorns), Christ the Judge of the World (orb and scepter), Christ in Triumph (trampling monsters), Christ the Teacher, King, Priest or Savior?

Within a few years a rift in the Church opened over this issue. Some said images of Jesus should be kept sacred for liturgical use and contemplation. Others said his image should emphasize evangelizing, educating, and edifying. Many said that all this was distracting, that there should be no images of Christ at all. Like the Israelites with the Golden Calf, believers might succumb to the very human tendency of putting more importance on the object than on the abstract idea it represented.

Here lies the danger; here is the reason for God's command to make no idols. God created us with imaginations not only as the means to behold His Creation and interpret His Word, but also to grow and maintain a living relationship with Him. Isn't that why we were created? The danger is in substituting beauty for holiness. That's when a "graven image" or an object made by a human can cause us to rest, to stop, in the contemplation

of beauty rather than crossing the bridge to understanding, or discovery, or prayer, or worship of an invisible God.

Art serves as that bridge to the unknown, the mysterious. We were uniquely created by God to respond to and interpret what we see, but it is up to us to choose to reflect upon what is good, right, and true. A picture that provides a portrait of the divine for us will leave an impression long after the viewing is over. Think back to the first time you saw a picture of Jesus that had such an impact. Maybe you've never seen one; some influential Christian thinkers in history have described their disappointment in artists' attempts to render a likeness of Christ and they've come to the conclusion that it's not possible. Yet with each generation we keep trying, putting bits of ourselves in the picture. When I was young, during the Jesus Movement, it was a picture of a Laughing Christ that inspired us, someone we could hang out with and call Brother and Friend.

What about you? I've done a lot of research about the history of the love/hate relationship between the American Protestant Churches and the art world. So I can imagine that if you grew up in the church you were exposed to either prints of Old Masters' paintings, or illustrations of Jesus' life that were sometimes nice but sometimes cheesy, sentimental, or even misleading. Werner Sallman's blonde, blue-eyed, fashion-model gorgeous Head of Jesus comes to mind, not remotely Semitic but a tour-de-force of beauty for that age. Jesus in the Garden. Jesus with the Children. Holman Hunt's exquisitely painted King Jesus holding a lamp and knocking on your door.

Whether it was great art or not, who cares, when you're little? I read a story of a pastor coming across a small boy in the Sunday School hallway; the boy had his ever-present blanket with him as he stood transfixed in front of a picture of Jesus dressed in a cloak, the corner of which was flung over his shoulder. When the pastor asked, "What do you see?" the little boy said in astonishment, "Look, Jesus has his blankie too!"

That moment of revelation in front of an artist's impression of Jesus may come at any time in your life. I remember seeing a fresco in a Byzantine church in Turkey, in the city where the Christian religion became official some 1600 years ago. It was painted in that stylized, cartoonlike flatness that you see in Russian icons or Greek Orthodox churches, not necessarily a picture you would choose for your living room. But it was of Jesus in his long white robe, legs apart and firmly planted, with a strong grip on the wrist of a terrified person he's yanking out of Hell. His face is confident and determined as if to say, "No, Satan, this one's mine!" It just hit me: not only has my Lord grabbed my soul from Hell, daily he's yanking me out of trouble like the big brother I never had.

Jesus is the same "Yesterday, Today and Forever." But we are not. It is good that God can still reach us through our eyes which are exposed to so much extraneous garbage every day. It is fitting that every era has its favorite portraits of Jesus. It's right that the struggle to articulate the miracle of the Incarnation should continue. It's life-changing to stop and seriously think about all that Jesus means to you. Although the great age of religion and the great age of art were the same, and some say both have passed, the Universal Church, our church, has not lost its enthusiasm or power to assimilate and transform. Today Jesus is portrayed in every race. We see him depicted as a man of contemplation and of action, nobly divine or pitifully human, triumphant in glory or a baby in his mother's arms. He is the summit of our own desires, the end of our journey to discover what it is to be both human and God-made. Turn now and look at your neighbor—there is the true face of Christ.