

In today's world of digital cameras, phones, etc. it is hard to imagine that we do not have a picture of Jesus. Thankfully or not, our ancestors will find our faces well documented. But, for some reason, the physical attributes of Jesus were not deemed critical to the writers of the Bible. -

Paul saw in the face of Jesus the image of God: a light, a glory, a glow that shone brighter than any other had shone. Over the last 2000 years – from the time of Paul to the present, individuals have sought to portray the face of Jesus. They do so in order to recognize its humanness – for indeed that is meaning of the incarnation, that Christ came as one of us, LIKE one of us. and at the same time, people have painted, sculpted, etched, made mosaics, trying to recognize or teach that there is something more to be seen in Jesus' face, something of the divinity that Christ bore to the world and bears to each of us.

We are going to look and reflect upon several “faces” of Jesus that have come to us from the earliest centuries of the church to the present. In looking at these images, we are invited to see what we might see – both the human face of Jesus – like ours – and the glory of God shining through.

The earliest Christians –especially those who were under threat of persecution –were resistant to visual images of Christ. If it was true, as Paul says, that they were proclaiming and worshipping Jesus, pictures could be misunderstood as idols. To this day, there are churches where pictures of Jesus are not allowed. If you look around our own sanctuary, there is not a picture of Jesus and I don't think there is one in Fellowship Hall. There are symbols, such as the cross or the dove, but no actual pictures. In some other religions, such as Islam, pictures of Mohammed are prohibited. This practice of aniconism was a part of Judaism and remained a part of the early Christian community until some time in the 300's.

This image of Jesus dates from the fourth century, around the year 375 CE. It is found on one of the catacombs, the underground tombs in Rome where people were buried and where some of the earliest Christians met to pray, tell the stories of Jesus and share in the Lord's Supper.

Jesus is dressed in philosopher's robe, a common depiction in those early centuries. Many of the earliest Christian teachers and preachers – including Paul in some of his letters taught that Jesus' wisdom and teaching were greater than the most famous and followed philosophers, including Plato and Socrates. On either side of his face are two Greek letters – Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the alphabet. And so here is the face of Jesus, but with a reminder of the glory of God that shines in and through it, recalling the words of sacred Scripture from the Book of Revelation:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come.” So in the Byzantine era, the images reflect the Almighty Jesus. The cosmic Jesus. The earliest

Christians weren't primarily asking 'what did Jesus look like?'

They were asking 'who is he?' And their answer was thunderous — he is the ruler of the cosmos. This is not a Jesus you approach casually. This is a Jesus before whom you fall silent. There is comfort in that image too, though — because a Christ who holds the universe in his hands can surely hold you



Moving ahead about two hundred years, we move to the East, away from Rome. This image is a classic Eastern image of Jesus. This is a man from the Eastern Mediterranean, Olive skinned and eyes of brown.

A strong face looks out at us, demanding our attention.

This image is called an icon, a painting that is meant to be used for meditation and prayer. They were placed in churches – in fact, they still are placed in churches – and people come and light candles before the icon.

People come to worship not the icon, but come to worship Christ.

This icon survived a difficult time in the life of the church

When there were major arguments about images such as this.

Some Christians destroyed them because they felt they were idols.

But this particular icon survived, and has been kept in a monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai for many, many centuries.

The purpose of looking at this icon is to enter into a time of prayer. That is why icons were often painted with Jesus looking straight out. Listen to these words from a hymn from the Eastern church, written thousands of years ago as they reflected upon the face of Jesus

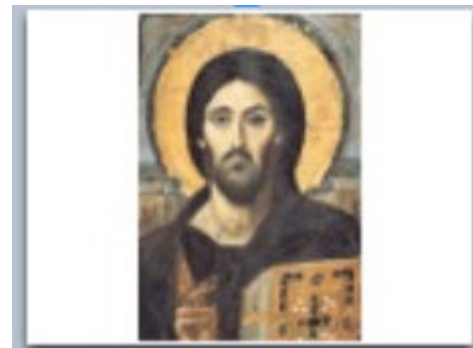
Jesus, invincible power,

Jesus, unending mercy,

Jesus, unspeakable love,

Jesus, enlighten me, for I have been in darkness.

Jesus, restore me, the prodigal.



By the Middle Ages, ordinary people lived with suffering as a constant companion — plague, famine, war. And the Jesus they needed was one who understood that. This is a Christ who has been where you are. Who knows what it is to hurt.

There is no sanitizing of pain here — just the radical claim that God entered into it fully." So Jesus is seen as the suffering servant – the man of Sorrows. Images have now changed from Christ reigning to Christ suffering.



Moving ahead to the Renaissance — Serene and Idealized Artists like Leonardo and Raphael portrayed Jesus with calm dignity, perfect proportion, and humanistic beauty. Two famous examples are DaVinci and Rembrandt:

DaVinci painted the Last Supper over a period of three years, probably from 1495-1498. He found people in the streets to be his models for the painting. Painted on a wall in a monastery, DaVinci went against the existing rules and did not paint a halo on Jesus, perhaps to emphasize the humanness of Jesus. He wanted each of the apostles to express their emotions as they responded to Jesus telling of his upcoming death. Such inferences as Jesus holding a hand out to the bread and wine, or he and Judas reaching for the same dish, as Judas clutches his bag of money or Peter holding a knife which foretells of Peter's severing the ear of one of the soldiers that comes to arrest Jesus. Yet, DaVinci painted Jesus with a serene composure in all of the agitation of the apostles.



Another artist who is well known for his paintings of Jesus is Rembrandt. A few years ago, the Detroit Institute of Art had a display in which they showed 64 of Rembrandt's paintings, etchings and drawings of Jesus. For the two centuries before Rembrandt, there was a model followed by most artist when they were depicting Jesus. The overall effect of these paintings is that Jesus seems strangely distant from things human. Rembrandt's early paintings reflected this formula, but then they changed, perhaps reflecting a change in his own faith. As stated in an article written by Matthew Copenhaver "This Jesus is obviously human—and this was something new. From near the beginning of Christian history, the doctrine of the incarnation was consistently affirmed by the church.



With Rembrandt's new depictions, the viewer was invited to consider what incarnation actually looked like." Rembrandt used his Jewish neighbors as models. As was stated in the Isaiah scripture, Jesus was not to come in the form of majesty. In the scripture, there are several incidents showing that he could get through a crowd unseen, and it was necessary for Judas to point him out to the Roman soldiers.

19TH CENTURY — The Gentle European Jesus

"Most of us grew up with some version of this Jesus — soft eyes, light brown hair, serene expression. For many of us, this image is deeply personal and cherished. But it's worth pausing to notice that this Jesus looks remarkably like the people who made him. He was shaped by a particular culture, in a particular moment. That doesn't make the devotion behind him any less real — but it does raise a question worth sitting with."

One of the most famous images of Jesus, it was painted by Holman Hunt and has been reproduced thousands of times.

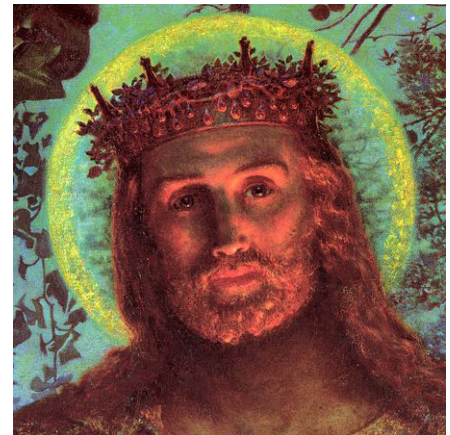
This image – actually painted three times – went on a world tour.

There is something in this face of Jesus that caught people's attention.

Someone who saw it said, "The vast crowd stood gazing in silent wonderment, and many in adoration, as though held by some irresistible magnet."

Another painting by Hunt is not just of a face.

Jesus is crowned with thorns – a reminder of the crucifixion, carries a lantern, and stands outside at night,



Called the Light of the World, this was painted during 1853-54 at night in a makeshift hut at Worcester Park Farm in Surrey. Towards the end of his life Hunt painted a life-size version in 1900 which was hung in St Paul's Cathedral, London. The idea of Jesus knocking at the door comes straight from Scripture, again from the book of Revelation: "Listen! I am standing and knocking at your door. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will eat together."

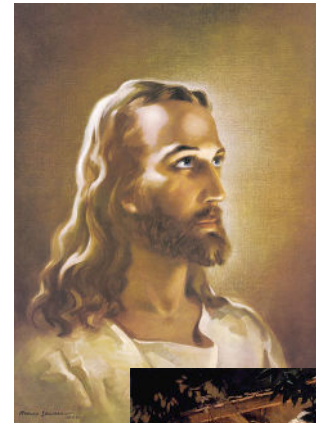
Holman Hunt described the meaning of the painting; The closed door are like our closed minds; the weeds symbolize the neglect of our spiritual lives; the bat that flies around in darkness symbolizes our ignorance, and the lantern is a reminder of one of Jesus' self-described titles from the gospel of John: "I am the light of the world." Also, note there is no door knob on the outside, as Holman felt that it indicated we have to let Christ in.



Another artist who painted two familiar painting of the same subject was Warner Sallman. In 1940. Sallman did an oil painting of the image was titled "The Head of Christ." For many people, this image of Jesus, composed like a photograph-portrait, looked like the serene "best friend" they wanted in their Savior.

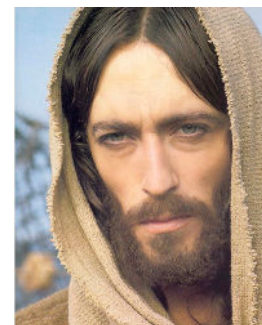
The World War II context was equally important for the dissemination and popular reception of Sallman's chief image, "The Head of Christ." The Salvation Army and the YMCA, both members of the USO, handed out pocket-sized versions of the picture to American soldiers leaving for Europe and Asia. Millions of copies found their way around the world and became a fondly remembered part of the war experience for many veterans.

Sallman also did a picture of Jesus at the door, called Jesus at Heart's Door. Notice the similarities of the two pictures of Jesus knocking that were done almost 100 years apart. On both there is no door knob, indicating the person needs to open the door to let Jesus in.



This next picture is actually the face of actor Robert Powell, who portrayed Jesus in the 1977 movie, "Jesus of Nazareth." For many people – especially in the United States –this is a common image of Jesus. Powell was one of many actors to portray Jesus. Powell actually auditioned for another role in the movie, but as soon as the director, Franco Zifferilli saw the Powell's image in the camera, he saw the face of Jesus. And for many of us, this white, brown haired, hazel-eyed Jesus is the way we picture the man whose face the gospel writers did not even comment about. This is a Christ we can identify with, who can imagine walking, preach-ing, healing, and teaching.

Interestingly enough, Robert Powell read the gospels as he was making the movie. In an interview, he commented that he had a hard time finding the "meek and mild" Jesus that others often talked about or depicted. He found a passionate and compassionate Christ, sometimes angry and always insistent about the radical love of God.



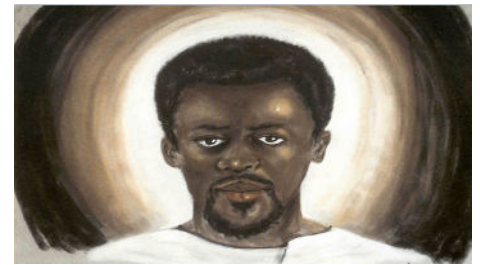
MULTICULTURAL — The Mirror

"And then we come to these. Jesus with African features. Jesus with Asian eyes. Jesus with brown skin, dark hair, the face of the Middle East where he actually lived. Each of these images was made by people who looked at Jesus and saw someone who looked back at them. And here is what I think that tells us — every generation, every culture, every person who has ever loved Jesus has seen in him something of themselves. Not because they were wrong to do so. But because that may be exactly the point. Jesus came for all of us. And when we look at his face, we are also, in some way, looking in a mirror."

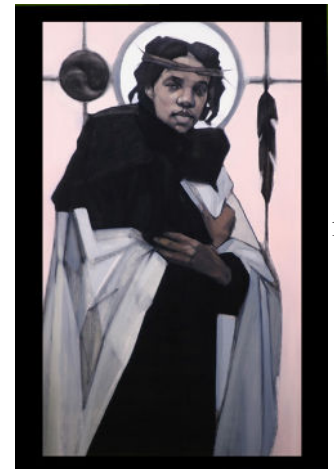


Although most of us think the image of Jesus as dark skinned is recent, one of the oldest images of Jesus is done in this mosaic and shows Jesus with dark, olive-colored skin. This one is from the 6th century.

Ethiopian Christians – one of the oldest branches of Christianity – often show faces of Jesus that reflect darker skin, with African hair and beard. If Christ came to the earth as one of us, then people sought to portray him with the same faces they saw in each other. There has long been a debate in Christianity about the face of Jesus - size, shape, color, facial details.

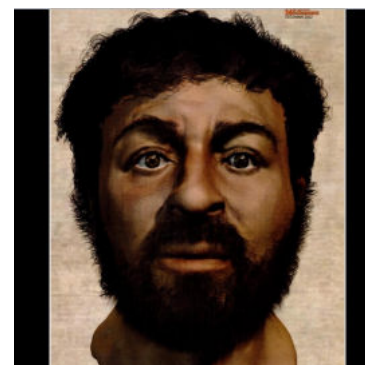


Late in 1999 Janet McKenzie's painting "Jesus of the People" was a elected winner of the National Catholic Reporter's competition for a new image of Jesus by judge, Sister Wendy Beckett, host of the PBS show "Sister Wendy's Story of Painting". In the words of Sister Wendy, "This is a haunting image of a peasant Jesus – dark, thick-lipped, looking out on us with ineffable dignity, with sadness but with confidence. Over His white robe He draws the darkness of our lack of love, holding it to Himself, prepared to transform all sorrows if we will let Him." McKenzie's goal was to create a work of art in keeping with her belief as a person and artist, and inclusive of groups previously uncelebrated in His image especially African Americans and women. She hoped "Jesus of the People" might remind us that we all are created in God's likeness



This image is much more recent

It was produced by the British broadcasting company for an Easter special in 2001. A production team made a face of Jesus, using medical, archaeological, scientific, and artistic evidence from the time of Jesus. They had a 1st century Jewish skull from Palestine and took into account hair and eyes of the time. This final image was a 3D computer generated face. Can you imagine Jesus looking something like this?



Across the centuries, people have sought to create an accurate depiction of Jesus. That's even truer now that we have scientific and technological tools to assist us. Especially with the introduction of AI, we can picture Jesus from many different cultural and ethnic groups: I entered prompts into an AI program to get the following images - each representing a different ethnicity:

African:



Latino



Asian



Native American



Middle Eastern



Are any of the images of Jesus that we have seen today familiar to you — and what does that image mean to you personally?

Is there an image of Jesus that surprised you, or that you found difficult to connect with? What does that reaction tell you about yourself?

I'd like to share with you some of my favorite images.

One was the painting we saw was Jesus knocking at the door. Growing up, that was one of the stained glass windows in my church, so I spent many a Sunday looking at that window. Strangely, I cannot tell you what the other two windows were.

More recently, these have become images of Jesus that speak to me:

After our son Greg died, someone gave us this picture.

Artist Danny Hahlbohm was born in Mineola, New York in June of 1949. He grew up on the eastern end of Long Island, New York until 1968 when he enlisted in the Armed Forces. Danny Hahlbohm was sent overseas, and towards the end of his tour, he experienced what he thought was a miracle from God, and it led him to become a Christian.

His picture, Welcome Home or Reunion represents a reassuring message for Christians

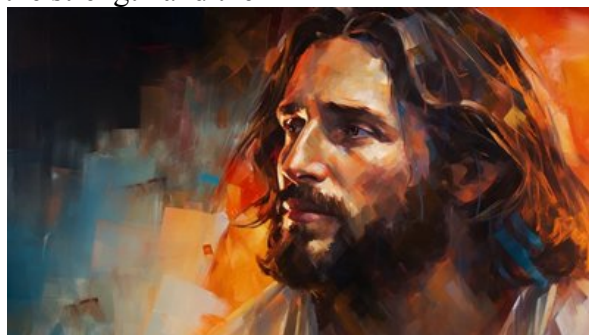


This is one of the laughing images of Jesus.

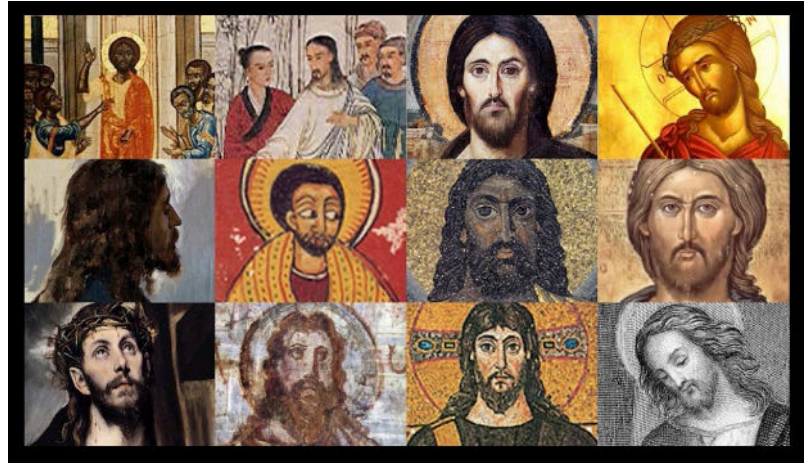
There is no record of Jesus laughing in the gospels, but some of his parables are quite funny and ironic. Might Jesus be laughing at one of his own parables? Might he be expressing the joy of God welcoming home the prodigal child, or the lost sheep? Might he be enjoying himself at one of the many dinners he attended?



Doing research for this, I found this recent image; it was entitled a realistic image of Jesus. It just seems to me to capture the strength and the compassion of Jesus.



So there have been thousands of attempts to capture the face of Jesus and we have looked at a few and seen how the time, culture and ethnic influences have shaped these images. I would guess that each of you have your favorite picture of the Face of Jesus. For some, it comes from your childhood, for some a more recent discovery. Hanging in the hallways of Broadway Church, a historic stone structure in midtown Kansas City, Mo., are more than 200 artistic portrayals of Jesus. One section of the exhibit titled “The Face of Jesus in Every Person,” includes images of Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, St. Francis and a mirror reflecting visitors



A the beginning, I said there were no pictures of Jesus in this sanctuary. Yet the face of Jesus can be here everytime we meet. All of you can be the face of Jesus to others. So my prayer for us today is that we might continue to look for the face of Jesus – in ourselves and each other – even as we seek to follow his words and way. So that as you look into a face, you see the face of Jesus, and they in turn see the face of Jesus in you. Amen.

