

January 20, 2013

Isaiah 62:1-5

Psalms 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

JOHN 2:1-11

## WHAT'S JESUS LIKE?

We live in what might be called “the golden age of fantasy.” Books like the “Harry Potter” series and “The Lord of the Rings” not only sold and sell in enormous quantities but also spawned movies that have been huge hits. Likewise, the “Twilight” saga, and I think we’ve just begun with “The Hunger Games.” Judging from the “coming attractions” I saw before the screening of “The Hobbit”, we are also far from done with dystopian science fiction movies. “Star Trek” and “Star Wars” also have lodged themselves in popular culture to a remarkable extent. For example, a recent scientific survey in the United Kingdom turned up a statistically significant number of people who, when asked their “religious affiliation”, listed “Jedi Knight.”

Which is just sad. It’s a movie, people! But clearly, to some people it’s *not* “just a movie,” any more than “Dungeons and Dragons” was just a board game, or any number of video games are “just video games” to some people. And the online universe enables people to get even more confused about what is reality and what is fantasy, including “relationships,” as a famous Notre Dame football player is just the latest to discover. I’m old enough to remember when people invariably fell in love only *after* they actually *met*, in person, face to face, maybe even talked in person, *maybe* even touched each other. The Beatles’ early hit “I saw her standing *there*” speaks to that ancient era.

Now, sadly, some people build relationships online with people who are not who the other person thinks they are. There’s a famous New Yorker cartoon of a dog at a p.c. keyboard who is saying to another dog in the room, “On-line, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

All of this is pertinent to **faith**. After all, biblical faith involves believing in and trusting Someone who we generally have not seen and certainly not touched (though perhaps some have heard) while we are in this mortal life. What can we *know* about Jesus?

First of all, we can *know* there was a historical figure named Jesus who was a controversial Jewish religious teacher in Palestine who was executed by the Romans not quite 2,000 years ago. The Jewish historian Josephus, who definitely did *not* believe that Jesus was the Messiah, refers to him in those terms. The Roman historian Tacitus refers to some of the followers of Jesus being executed by the Roman Emperor Nero in what we call A.D. 64. It's not much, but enough to contradict anyone who might think that the whole Jesus story is completely made up. And yes we have -- and I have seen -- a stone monument from what we call the First Century with the name Pontius Pilate on it. It is *Pilate's* name which definitively anchors the creeds in a specific place and time in history. Snip that phrase "was crucified under Pontius Pilate" out of the creeds and the story of Jesus in the creeds is no longer connected to space/time.

Of course Pilate executed a whole lot of people, so what is *important* about Jesus as opposed to the rest of them can only be known by faith. But let's continue with "what we know." We live in an enormously *visual* age, so one of the first questions people ask about someone tends to be "what does so-and-so *look* like?" Let me tell you what the Bible says about Jesus' looks during his earthly ministry. (Pause.) You have now heard what the Bible says about Jesus' looks. Nothing.

In fact the Bible -- in contrast with 21st Century pop culture -- is not all that interested in peoples' looks in general. We know that the Philistine warrior Goliath was the size of an NBA power forward (at least), that King David had "beautiful eyes" and was "ruddy" in complexion, that the prophet Elisha was bald, and that John the Baptist was "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist", but those are rare and sketchy details. I'm glad I'm addressing all of you and not the Annual Meeting of Revlon Corporation, but the fact is that physical appearance was not all that important to biblical writers; they were more interested in what was *inside* a person. Perhaps we can all take a lesson from that.

Of course, all that lack of information has not stopped the makers of religious paintings and stained glass windows. Now, I appreciate our beautiful stained glass windows and many others which I have seen in various places, but most biblical figures I've seen in paintings or stained glass windows look an awful lot like the people who *paid* for the art, and less plausibly like the historical characters.

For example, let's look at the beautiful stained glass window on my left, your right, which shows the visit of the three wise men to the Christ Child. It is extremely unlikely that one of the three wise men was blonde, as depicted in the window. All the Bible says about where the wise men came from is that they were "from the East", but if you pull out a map and envision yourself in Israel and look to the East, *Norway* is not one of the countries which pops up as a possible origin of the three wise men.

Personally, I have no problem with such windows and paintings as long as we recognize that they are culturally conditioned. A picture of a blonde, blue-eyed Jesus (such as I remember from my childhood picture books) is no more and no less legitimate than a picture of Jesus who is Japanese, or Nigerian, or Mexican. The Bible says "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us", and what "us" looks like varies a lot around the world -- and around this room as well.

If we want to be historically plausible, it's likely Jesus of Nazareth was brown-haired, brown-eyed, bearded and had light olive-colored skin. But it's not important.

Some depictions of Jesus also give him the physique of the class computer geek in High School. Now, there's nothing wrong with computer geeks, but if we want to be historically plausible, let's challenge this portrayal. Jesus worked all of his working life until the age of 30 as a *carpenter*, and there were no power tools back then except for this [I point to my bicep]. Likewise, we *know* that the Bible only mentions him riding a donkey once (for symbolic reasons during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday) and it never mentions him riding a horse, and certainly not a stretch limo, so the assumption is that he walked everywhere routinely, like most people.

Now, the last time I was in Israel we were told that the longest stretch of straight, flat highway in the entire country is six miles long. We're not talking Kansas. *Everything* is hilly. Normal life would give you a good work-out. Specifically, the Gospels talk about Jesus and his companions walking from "the region of Tyre" where Jesus healed the Syro-Phoenician woman to "the region of Caesarea Phillipi", where Jesus asked his followers "who do you say that I am?" Tyre is on the Mediterranean Sea; Caesarea Phillipi is in what we call the Golan Heights, a mountainous region on the border with Syria. I'm a life member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, but when I was there I was really glad that we went up into that area in a car. The hike from the seashore would give a really good

workout to a platoon of U.S. Marines. In sum, if your image of Jesus is of a pale anorexic, as they say in New Yawk, “fuggedabowdit”.

Finally, most pictures of Jesus show him looking pretty *serious*. Well, he certainly could be, he had a lot to be serious about, but let’s not evoke mid-20th Century American commentator H.L. Mencken’s crack that “ a Puritan is someone whose secret fear is that somewhere, somehow, someone is happy.” Jesus felt *joy* among all the whole range of human emotions. He came, as he says in John’s Gospel, “that we may have life, and have it abundantly.” That includes joy.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel. You knew I was going to get there eventually, right? John’s Gospel generally gives us a rather formal picture of Jesus which emphasizes his divinity, but John is also the Gospel which describes Jesus as being “tired” when he got to the well in Samaria where he met the Samaritan woman, and when on the cross in John’s Gospel he declares how thirsty he is, so his humanity is described as well. And in John, Jesus’ very first miracle is *at a wedding reception*.

Now really, have you ever thought of Jesus at a wedding reception? Picture Jesus doing [I sing] “The Electric Slide”. Chicken-dancing, maybe? or more likely, the First Century equivalent of “Hava nagila”. But mainly, hanging out with family, friends and neighbors and *having fun*. And his first miracle was not healing the groom’s wedding day jitters/acute intestinal distress. His first miracle was to make sure that there was enough wine for everyone at the party! [I sing] “Celebrate good times, come on!”

For a moment, I ask everyone to close your eyes and picture Jesus *laughing*. (Pause.)

Now of course, I know there is a deep theological meaning to the water into wine miracle: the wine Jesus creates is better than the “house wine” at the reception hall just as the “new wine” of Jesus’ teaching is better than the “old wine” of the Hebrew Torah. But today, let’s just picture Jesus as someone a person could, so to speak, “sit down and have a beer with” -- but definitely not six beers, because while drinking alcohol is accepted in the Bible, drunkenness definitely is not.

So Jesus was (and is) someone who celebrated good times *as well as* dramatically came to the rescue of people who were suffering, someone who made possible a wonderful picnic for over 5,000 people on a sunny afternoon in the country as well as ate the Passover meal with his disciples on the night before he died, someone who embraced a vast array of “outsiders” and oppressed people -- something we would do well to emulate -- and made them his friends and followers as well as confronted the stuffy and contemptuous powers-that-be who wanted to crush him. Jesus could vigorously and angrily throw the money-changers out of the temple *and* gently hold and infant in his arms and bless her.

Jesus was and is both strong *and* tender physically, spiritually, emotionally and relationally -- and by his power he has enabled his followers, male and female alike, to be *both* as well, thus liberating everyone from narrow and damaging stereotypes of expected behavior.

Nowhere in the Bible does it say what Jesus looked like, but over 30 times it says that Jesus *touched* people, and that *was* important to tell us, because every time Jesus touched someone something good happened. It's no accident that all seven sacraments of the Church involve *touch*. Jesus was -- and is -- and “hands on” Savior who can offer us transformation *right now*. It is happening all around us and around the world, and I myself have experienced the beginning of what I hope will be a longer-than-lifetime transformation thanks to him.

Jesus is no “imaginary friend”, no internet invention, but a historical figure who changed lives *and* a living Savior who is changing them now. Being *with him* is the best, healthiest and holiest kind of a “high” one can get in this life, and that is just an appetizer for what he offers next in the Kingdom of God.

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