

“The Image of Christ”

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2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-21

‘For we did not follow cleverly devised myths
when we made known to you the power
and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.’

2 Peter 1:16-21

Let us pray... O God,
Long ago, you lived among us and shared our common lot
as human beings.
You had a face that people could see
when you smiled and when you spoke,
when you were angry and when you wept.
You had hands that could heal and that could be grasped
to pull people up out of their illness, grief, shame, even death.
You were God made real to us on planet Earth.
Help us to see you still. Amen

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany –
which celebrates the appearance of Christ to the world.
One of the earliest images of Christ showed him as a good shepherd
carrying a lamb – but that was symbolic of Christ’s character.
Technically speaking, the first picture of Jesus himself
was as a baby in his mother Mary’s arms.
This day is also called Transfiguration Sunday and it’s about imagery, too –
Jesus’ iconic transfiguring into his true identity as a spiritual being...

Most everybody knows what an icon is these days –
it’s a little picture-symbol on your computer, right?
An icon represents a computer file and you put the little arrow
on it and ‘left-click’ to ‘open’ it to read information or see a picture.
Sometimes we say a celebrity is ‘an icon’ – for good or ill,
somebody who has notoriety and may represent
a particular cause, style, or achievement.

The word ‘icon’ is Greek and it literally means ‘image’ –
but the connection with Greece, or more specifically
the Greek Orthodox Church, goes deeper in significance.
In fact, the concept of icon or iconography can even be said
to be a defining characteristic of Greek Orthodoxy.

Willard, p.2

If you ever attend an Eastern Orthodox service or ‘liturgy’,
you’ll notice many pictures of various saints and Christ himself.
Usually the most prominent icon is a huge one of Jesus Christ
looking down through the ceiling of the sanctuary,
holding the Gospel in one hand
and blessing with the other, his head surrounded by a halo
with the Divine Name of God and the cross inscribed within.

Icons became synonymous with the Eastern Orthodox tradition
after the *iconoclastic* controversy of the 8th Century.
Now, ancient Greek culture celebrated the physical beauty
of the human form in sculptures of heroes, gods & goddesses.
With the transformation of Greek society into a Christian culture,
this art form was translated into a specific style of paintings
portraying Biblical “heroes” called iconography.

Idolatry in the form of ‘graven images’ was forbidden
by the 2nd Commandment in traditional Jewish culture
and this belief was endorsed by a faction of the early Church.
When that group gained power, they ordered the destruction of all icons
throughout the Christianized Roman Empire.
Some icons survived that era by being covered over with plaster –
an example of one of these paintings is on display in our Narthex.
It is called ‘Christos Pantocratur’ – or ‘Christ over all Creation’
and shows a unique style otherwise lost to the ages
in comparison with the style of contemporary icons.
It was discovered in the 1960s after being hidden for more than 1,000 years
and is believed to be one of the oldest images
showing Christ with a beard and long hair
and probably painted – or ‘written’, in the 6th Century AD (CE).

But after the 2nd Council of Nicaea in 787 AD (CE),
icons were re-institutionalized as appropriate tools
for worship and education.
Now the way I have heard that icons should be used is that they are to be
valued like snapshots of loved ones,
but they also function as windows to the individuals
or events they represent – and not to be worshiped themselves.

Anything can become an idol and that was the original objection
to the use of icons.
Like I said before, some people are celebrated as icons
for their recognizability – and not necessarily their virtue.

Willard, p.3

Perhaps you have heard of Snooki who was on a TV reality show and notorious for her self-indulgent behavior.

Lately that spotlight has been directed toward actor Charlie Sheen for his recent attention-getting behavior and statements.

Now as much as we may groan at their exploits,
let us remember how quickly the tabloid perspective
turns from praise to condemnation of such celebrities.

Just as icons can easily turn into idols,
icon-advocates can just as easily turn into iconoclasts.

Jesus of Nazareth has been represented for us through art and the Word –
he is the Word of God made visible, incarnate – ‘in the flesh’.

He was someone whom his disciples described as the Son of God –
and being Jewish, they would not have carelessly said this
for fear of misrepresenting the name of God.

This doesn't prove that Jesus was the unique Son of God,
but it makes the point that a significant number of people in his time
were convinced this was true.

Through the centuries ever since that iconography was legalized,
Christian artists have depicted Jesus in the context of their time.

There are many paintings of the events of Christ's life
showing what the artist thought was Jewish culture,
but also dressing the people in the costumes and customs
of the artist's time.

It is important for the Christian community to do this in each generation –
so that the Good News is allowed to be seen as relevant
and to be heard as speaking to the issues of the day.

But again, we always run the risk of icons turning into idols –
of re-creating Christ in our own image
and risk not seeing him at all.

One way to compensate for this tendency is to consider visualizing Christ
as someone other than yourself –
to see Christ as ‘the least of these’ in society.

Besides the icon of Christ in the Narthex, there is a sculpture bust
of an African-American slave that is titled “We Shall Overcome”.

It might be kind of hard to imagine Christ looking quite like
this particular character who has such a fierce expression –
except maybe when Jesus was casting out demons.

Yet with regard to this statue, that demon to be overcome
would be institutional racism.

Willard, p.4

So, that's a challenge – and a help,
to avoid creating a comfortable Christ in one's own image
or at least to consider how Christ can be present and at work
amidst a group of people who are different from 'us'.

Consider this example for how we could see Christ in others –
even, those who appear to be hostile...

A white seminarian was invited by a black friend to hear a visiting preacher
at a large AME Church – an African Methodist Episcopal Church
in a Southern city.

Over a thousand people were there to hear this famous preacher speak –
and the young seminarian was the only one of his complexion.

Then, the preacher started in on his message and it took an angry turn
condemning the injustices still evident in American society
against the black community.

The white community was compared to Egyptians and Romans
for the ongoing oppression of racism.

After the service – as they were making their way
through the crowded balcony toward the exit,
the black friend apologized to her white friend saying
she had not expected the tone of the preacher's message
to be so harsh.

But the seminarian thanked her instead for the opportunity
to hear how the black community was honestly feeling.

And as they entered the staircase, going down the steps.
there on the wall before them was a full-length,
life-sized picture of Jesus Christ knocking at a door –
with blonde hair and blue eyes.

We need to be prepared to welcome Christ in one another
no matter how clever his disguise.

We have a God who had a face;
a God who walked the earth and went around doing good;
a God who was characterized through the words and deeds of
Jesus Christ who cast out devils, healed people from diseases,
and has inspired self-determination
over and against dictators' oppression ever since.

We have a God who is worthy of our love and respect;
worthy to be worshiped and served.

Amen

*In our Epistle lesson today from 2 Peter 1:16-21,
we have a testimony of the event called 'the Transfiguration'
by the Apostle Peter.*

*It is an incident that hearkens back to events described in Exodus
about Moses' encounters with God on Mt Sinai
and meant for early Christians – and us,
to see Jesus as part of the ongoing revelation of God to humankind.*

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths
when we made known to you the power
and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.

17 For he received honour and glory
from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him
by the Majestic Glory, saying,
'This is my Son, my Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased.'

18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven,
while we were with him on the holy mountain.

19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed.
You will do well to be attentive to this
as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns
and the morning star rises in your hearts.

20 First of all you must understand this,
that no prophecy of scripture
is a matter of one's own interpretation,
21 because no prophecy ever came by human will,
but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit
spoke from God.

Jesus and his disciples were walking along the road in the northern territory called Caesarea-Philippi when out of the blue, he asked them this question, 'Who do people say that I am?' And the disciples seem to be guessing at the answer he wants to hear so he asks again, but in a different way, 'Who do you say that I am?' And Peter says to him, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.' But when Jesus tells them all what is in store for him – that he will be killed, yet rise again, Jesus sees that they still don't understand...

[Matt. 17:1-20]

ABOUT A WEEK LATER,
JESUS TOOK PETER, JAMES AND HIS BROTHER JOHN
WITH HIM AND LED THEM HIGH UP A MOUNTAIN
TO BE IN SOLITUDE.
THEN, HE WAS METAMORPHOSIZED –
HE WAS TRANSFORMED IN THEIR PRESENCE;
AND HIS FACE SHINED LIKE THE SUN
AND HIS GARMENTS BECAME LIKE WHITE LIGHT!
AND LOOK HERE!
THEY SAW MOSES AND ELIJAH CONFERRING WITH JESUS!
AND PETER RESPONDED BY SAYING,
“LORD, IT IS WONDERFUL WE ARE HERE!
IF YOU WANT, I WILL PUT UP THREE SHELTERS –
ONE FOR YOU, ONE FOR MOSES,
AND ONE FOR ELIJAH!”
YET WHILE HE WAS SPEAKING, LOOK HERE!
A BRIGHT CLOUD OVERSHADOWED THEM
AND THEY WERE STUNNED TO HEAR
A VOICE FROM THE CLOUD, SAYING,
“THIS IS THE ONE WHO COMES FROM ME.
ONE WHO IS BELOVED, ONE IN WHOM I DELIGHT.
LISTEN TO HIM!”
AND HEARING THIS,
THE DISCIPLES COLLAPSED AND COVERED THEIR FACES
FOR THEY WERE TERRIFIED.
AND JESUS CAME TO THEM AND TOUCHED THEM, SAYING,
“STAND UP AND DON'T BE AFRAID.”
AND LIFTING UP THEIR EYES, THEY SAW NO ONE –
BUT JESUS.
AS THEY WERE GOING DOWN THE MOUNTAIN,
JESUS URGED THEM, SAYING,

“TELL NO ONE ABOUT THIS VISION
UNTIL THE SON OF MAN – THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY,
HAS BEEN RAISED FROM DEATH.”
YET THE DISCIPLES QUESTIONED HIM, SAYING,
“WHY DO THE RELIGIOUS EXPERTS SAY THAT
ELIJAH MUST COME FIRST?”
AND JESUS ANSWERED THEM,
“ELIJAH IS CERTAINLY COMING
AND WILL RESTORE ALL THINGS.
STILL I SAY TO YOU,
ELIJAH HAS ALREADY COME ,
YET WAS NOT RECOGNIZED;
AND THEY DID TO HIM AS THEY PLEASED.
THEREFORE, THE SON OF MAN –
THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY,
WILL SUFFER IN THE SAME WAY.”
THEN, THE DISCIPLES UNDERSTOOD THAT
HE WAS TALKING ABOUT JOHN THE BAPTIST.

AS THEY WERE COMING TOWARDS A CROWD,
A MAN APPROACHED JESUS AND
KNELT BEFORE HIM, SAYING,
“LORD, HAVE MERCY UPON MY CHILD,
FOR HE IS MOONSTRUCK AND INSANE.
HE IS ALWAYS FALLING INTO FIRE
OR INTO POOLS OF WATER!
SO, I BROUGHT HIM TO YOUR DISCIPLES,
BUT THEY COULD NOT HEAL HIM.”
BUT JESUS REACTED BY SAYING,
“YOU ARE A GENERATION THAT IS FAITHLESS
AND DISTORTED IN YOUR THINKING!
HOW LONG SHALL I BE WITH YOU?
HOW LONG SHALL I – BEAR WITH YOU?
BRING THE CHILD TO ME.”
THEN, JESUS CONFRONTED THE DEMON
AND IT CAME OUT.
SO, THE CHILD WAS HEALED FROM THAT TIME ON.

LATER,
THE DISCIPLES APPROACHED JESUS – PRIVATELY, SAYING,
“WHY COULDN’T WE CAST IT OUT?”
AND JESUS SAID TO THEM,
“BECAUSE YOU HAVE TOO LITTLE
FAITH.
I’M TELLING YOU THE TRUTH, THOUGH;
IF YOU HAD FAITH –
EVEN THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED,
YOU COULD TELL THIS MOUNTAIN,
‘MOVE’, AND IT WOULD MOVE
FOR NOTHING WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE
FOR YOU.”

Matt.17:1-20 [RSV]

- [1] And after six days Jesus took with him
Peter and James and John his brother,
and led them up a high mountain apart.
- [2] And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun,
and his garments became white as light.
- [3] And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah,
talking with him.
- [4] And Peter said to Jesus,
"Lord, it is well that we are here;
if you wish, I will make three booths here,
one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah."
- [5] He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them,
and a voice from the cloud said,
"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased;
listen to him."
- [6] When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces,
and were filled with awe.
- [7] But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
"Rise, and have no fear."
- [8] And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one
but Jesus only.
- [9] And as they were coming down the mountain,
Jesus commanded them,
"Tell no one the vision,
until the Son of man is raised from the dead."
- [10] And the disciples asked him,
"Then why do the scribes say that first Eli'jah must come?"
- [11] He replied,
"Eli'jah does come, and he is to restore all things;
[12] but I tell you that Eli'jah has already come,
and they did not know him,
but did to him whatever they pleased.
So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands."
- [13] Then the disciples understood
that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

[14] And when they came to the crowd,
a man came up to him and kneeling before him said,
[15] "Lord, have mercy on my son,
for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly;
for often he falls into the fire,
and often into the water.

[16] And I brought him to your disciples,
and they could not heal him."

[17] And Jesus answered,
"O faithless and perverse generation,
how long am I to be with you?
How long am I to bear with you?
Bring him here to me."

[18] And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him,
and the boy was cured instantly.

[19] Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said,
"Why could we not cast it out?"

[20] He said to them,
"Because of your little faith.
For truly, I say to you,
if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed,
you will say to this mountain,
'Move from here to there,' and it will move;
and nothing will be impossible to you."