

The Christ Figure

It is no easy task to give the Lord a body. Scripture is frustratingly silent when it comes to the physical appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. If the Old Testament goes out of its way to describe King David in detail and devotes almost the entire Song of Songs to poetry full of adjectives and comparisons for the physical attributes of two lovers, the Gospels say nothing about the appearance of the very King of Kings himself. Nowhere is there any indication of how tall Jesus was, whether he was stocky or thin, strong or weak, with long and curly or short and straight hair. Never mind his facial features, posture, or how he walked. The omission is perplexing.

Apart from the Transfiguration, when every part of him is filled with light, there would appear to be only one place in all of Scripture where the earthly human body of God-With-Us is described in physical terms, and its author is a prophet who never met him. In an age when physical beauty and youth are prized above all else, it is startling to read Isaiah's description of a man who had no beauty or majesty whatsoever to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that should make us desire him. The Suffering Servant was despised and rejected, Isaiah says; a man of sorrows acquainted with grief, like one from whom people look away. (Isaiah 53:2-5)

By all rights, Jesus could have been the most beautiful human being ever born—one would expect extraordinary beauty to emanate from the Son of God—but it appears as though even in this he chose to be poor. Remember what God told the prophet Samuel when Samuel was reluctant to anoint a mere shepherd boy as King of Israel? "People judge others by what they look like, but I judge people by what is in their hearts."

This is an important insight for any follower of Christ to keep in mind, because the Lord needs us to look for him in everyone we meet, regardless of age, race, skin color, gender, physical ability or beauty. That Jesus was born at a time in human history when there were no means to record the image of a common Israelite like him is brilliant. The less tied we are to a single image of him, the better unless of course you're an artist who has to bring forth a single image.

I'm sure I looked at several hundred images of Jesus for inspiration. From church goods catalogs to art-history tomes, from photographs I took over years of travel to the chapels in the basement of the Abbey, it became obvious to me that there were all sorts of ways to depict Christ on across: Head down; head up; eyes open; eyes closed; arms outstretched; arms up; arms pulled back and down; in the throes of suffering; already dead; just resurrected; about to ascend to glory; fully clothed; fully naked; thin and

emaciated; very muscular and strong; nails in; nails out; fresh and clean with tiny pinpricks for wounds; bloody and torn, with extremely graphic gashes in his hands and feet and side. The variations go on and on.

Each choice influences the interpretation, of course. Each characteristic says something different about the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord. Suffice it to say not a day went by when I did not pray in earnest for the Lord to bring this work to perfection for the glory of his name. If I have to give you a set of physical features, Lord, what should they be? If I have to tie you down to a single gesture, what is it you want it to say to this community? Of all the ways you can be depicted on and in relationship to the cross, how do you want to inspire this portion of your Body, the Church, to greater faith?

An image that almost always came to mind when I thought of Cold Spring and Saint Boniface Church was a photograph I saw in a newspaper soon after the shootings. In it, your young people were crowded together all the way to the front center pews, shoulder to shoulder. It was a moving image, and when it occurred to me that your families sit in the very same pews during funerals, it seemed important to orient Christ's entire gesture to that particular place in the assembly. But what hopeful message could an image of the Lord speak that would apply to anyone's suffering? What choices could I make as an artist that would reinforce what the Lord has already said about the bigger picture, about the power of death itself?

In the end, what you see before you is a Christ who is very much alive. Though he was crucified- the wounds are immediately evident and permanent so that there is no denying the fact of his suffering and death-he has been resurrected and is full of life forever. Whether the figure appears as if he just sat up in the tomb in the first light of the resurrection, or is descending from his place at the right hand of God, the fact of his being alive right here and now seemed essential to emphasize in this particular time and place.

He also faces us directly. Though it was tempting to depict the powerful moment in the crucifixion narratives when Jesus thinks the Father has forsaken him and he cries out to the heavens in despair, the abiding orientation of his life on earth was towards the people of God. "Love one another as I have loved you," he commanded his followers. What we see instead is a Christ who faces the assembly, not the heavens, his right hand outstretched in the direction of his gaze. The gesture is deliberately ambiguous to suggest any number of things. Is he bestowing peace? Sowing seeds? Beckoning us to take his hand and follow him?

It was the call to follow Christ---to the cross, to life everlasting---that I wanted to embody in this particular figure of him. Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest. You, who have no money, come, buy and eat without money and without price! Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. By beckoning with his right hand and pointing with his left to a place beyond the cross, the body of the Word Incarnate becomes the visual path to salvation. For I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, says the Lord. Let me show you the way to the Father, for he has prepared a place for you in the new and eternal Jerusalem, and no one can come to him except through me. By stepping off the cross with his right foot, he comes to meet us where we are. He appears once again to the disciples in the locked room. His left foot, in contrast, remains on the cross, the toes curled in agony. Christ shares our suffering, even now.

In the end, it was my intention to reveal a crucified and resurrected Lord more concerned about each one of you than he is with his own glory. "From the very beginning, though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped," Paul says. He was, and is, Love incarnate, and his love for you is in your midst every time you gather together in his name. If this image of Christ--only one of the many that surround you in this place---reminds you to take his hand and follow his path of love, it will not have been formed in vain.

God bless your community and may Christ's peace be with you!
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