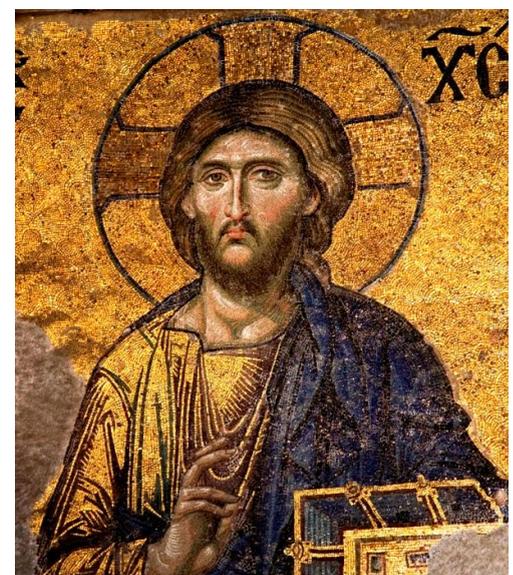
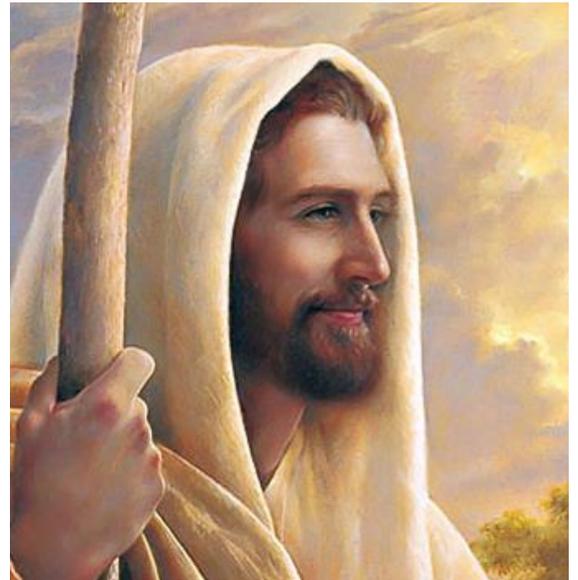
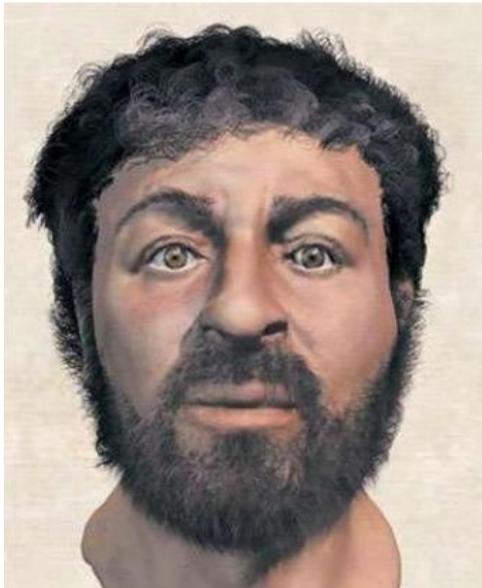


20:20 Vision – Jesus

John 4.5-42



An unusual start for the sermon today. Would you just close your eyes for a minute, and picture Jesus..... . Well, I can't know what has come into your mind. But maybe now you could have a look at the front of today's service sheet. There you find four out of hundreds and hundreds of ways in which people have pictured him. According to the experts, the one most likely to be somewhere in the realms of accuracy is the one in the top left, being a reconstruction of how forensic anthropologists think a young man from Israel in the 1st century might have looked. I doubt that was what was in your mind

We are trying to move towards a 20:20 vision of Jesus in our Lent series today. Good vision needs both eyes to be working well. And in a way that is a very helpful thing in terms of today's task. Because what is true is that we have to see Jesus both with the eye of reason, or fact, and the eye of faith. And that dilemma was what faced the people in today's Gospel. Who was this man by the well, who broke with social conventions in speaking to a Samaritan woman, and who seemed not only to see her physically, but to see through her as well. So in the story people move from seeing Jesus as an ordinary man, to saying 'This is truly the Saviour of the World'. Getting that balance between Jesus the Man and Jesus being divine has exercised Christian minds from very early days. I want to hold on to what Martin Luther said five hundred years ago: "Take hold of Jesus as a man, and you will discover that he is God." That, after all, was what the disciples did. Those very ordinary men who spent 24/7 with Jesus for years came to the conclusion that the only way they could make sense of him was to say he was, in St Thomas's words 'My Lord and my God'

Let me quickly deal with six obvious things which we can see with the eye of reason and fact.. First of all, Jesus was a real person in history. There was a time not long ago when there was a fashion for saying that Jesus never existed, that he was a figment of men's imagination. That carries no weight. We still have written evidence from almost contemporary sources which refer to him. For example, the Roman historian Tacitus in about 115 AD wrote about the persecution of Christians under Nero: "Christus, from whom their name is derived, was executed at the hands of the Procurator Pontius Pilate in the reign of Tiberius." There are five or six other such non-Christian sources of information that Jesus was real, not imaginary - let alone the Christian sources, who naturally might be dismissed as biased!

Secondly, he was a Jewish peasant from Galilee. He had no pretensions to rank or privilege, and lived and worked as a manual worker in the rather despised Northern province around Nazareth. He was part of a largish family. His whole style of teaching after he gave up his home and trade was totally in tune with his ordinary Jewish background and upbringing. Rabbi Hugo Gryn wrote a few years ago: "I recognize in Jesus a fellow-Jew."

Thirdly, he was a remarkable user of words - whether we see that in preaching, teaching, or story-telling. This gift was so remarkable that people would travel long distances to hear him, and his words stuck in their minds for years afterwards. We have evidence of this from the oral traditions which eventually became written down in the books of the New Testament. His imagery and illustrations have continued to intrigue and inspire people throughout the world, including people with no particular religious affiliation or sympathy for what he said.

Fourthly, he was a perfectly ordinary human being, with all the ordinary attributes that we would expect of any man. Those who wrote about him did not attempt to conceal that ordinariness in any way. So we read that he was tired, that he cried, that he felt pain, that he was angry. And of course we read that he was born just like everyone else, and he died just like anyone else. The circumstances of his birth and death - in a stable and on a gallows - were unusual, but the events themselves were just like any other human being's birth and death.

Fifthly, he was a natural leader. He had no authority that came from accident of birth - as we have seen, he was of peasant stock. He had no authority from higher education - what education he had would have been extremely rudimentary. But his personality was such that he could inspire very down-to-earth working men to abandon their trades, and follow him in a precarious and sometimes dangerous existence as a travelling preacher and healer. He could hold his own with the most learned and the most influential people of his day. He was almost universally spoken of well.

Lastly, he was a radical. I have to be careful how I phrase this. We have no evidence that he was politically, religiously, or sociologically allied to the extremist groups which existed in his day. What I mean is that he was entirely "his own man" as people say these days. He said what he believed to be the truth, and not the accepted wisdom of the day. He therefore was free to

challenge that wisdom, and make people see things from a different perspective. People said of him how different he was from the usual run of teachers and preachers because of this innate sense of authority with which he spoke.

If we grasp some or all of this, we are on our way to 20:20 vision- in one eye at least, if that isn't a contradiction in terms. But what about the other eye – the eye of faith? In a sense that all comes down to how we *relate* to Jesus. In our hymns this morning, the language is all about that eye's vision. We have already called Jesus Lord, King of Glory, and Saviour. As we go on we will sing about Jesus as Brother, Shepherd, friend, prophet, as well as more philosophical ideas like Jesus being our Life, our Way, our End. Fortunately, we won't include such expressions as "the existential ground of our being" or "the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos".

There isn't time, and this isn't the place to delve into the complexities of what Logos, or Messiah, or seemingly simple expressions like 'Son of Man' imply about Jesus' divinity. Let me just focus on one of those 'faith-eye' expressions – perhaps the most common of all – the word 'Lord'.

It was a word used by all people in authority - so a slave called his master "Lord"; the Roman citizen used it of the Emperor. It was the title given to pagan deities - "the Lord Serapis" in Egypt for example. But it was also the word used by Greek-speaking Jews to refer to God. And it became a pivotal title for Christian belief, because as we understand it the earliest statement of belief required before baptism was to confess "Jesus is Lord." But can I invite you to reflect on how confusing and ambiguous this can be. When you hear the word "Lord" in prayers, or in a sermon, to whom do you think it refers? To God? To Jesus? Sometimes it is obvious enough "through Jesus Christ our Lord." Or, on the other hand: "Therefore Lord and Heavenly Father". But of whom do we think when we hear and say "The Lord is here" or "The Lord be with you." The answer technically is that it refers to God, but I am equally sure that many people assume it to be Jesus. But do you see that, whatever we have in mind, it is about the relationship we have with God who is in Christ?

We can join in the age-old debates about the precise nature of the relationship between Jesus and God the Father – indeed we will do so in a minute or two when we say the Creed, which is a c.4th attempt to put that into words. But that doesn't give us 20:20 vision. Trying to analyse how that can be is simply beyond human intellectual competence. It is an act of faith, not of reason. It is something coming from that other eye – the eye of faith.

Let me share with you some statements from very distinguished scholars which maybe give us some help. Hans Kung put it like this: "The true man Jesus of Nazareth is for faith the real revelation of the one true God." And another modern Roman Catholic theologian, Edward Schillebeekx, who perhaps has spent more time on the question of the nature of Jesus than any other man in the c20th century, said in a sermon "Through his message and his way of life, Jesus redefines in word and deed what being human is, and what being God means. According to Jesus there is no difference between what scholars call 'God in himself and 'God for us'. He is God for us in his own being." Or looking round our own church, we have Michael Ramsey's famous statement in "God Christ and the World" where he said "God is Christ-like, and in him is no unChristlikeness at all". And I have a particular affection for David Jenkin's Credo: "God is. He is as he is in Jesus. Therefore I have hope." We look for a 20:20 vision of Jesus, but we will never have it in this life. We need to echo the words of John Newton, which we will sing in our last hymn: 'But when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.' In the meantime, with less than 20:20 vision – we picture him as best we can, we understand him as best we can, and praise him as best we can, and call him Lord and whatever other words express the way we have come to relate to him. Those will have to do for now.