

Right. With the Epiphany season done and all that lambent mysticism stuff of out the way, in this little liturgical lacuna before Lent I want us to get back down to earth and back to basics. Please don't start shuffling in your pew and eye the exits. This isn't going to be a Victorian Values rant. As if. Back to basics means faith basics. Back to the very beginning, the ABC 101 of what it's all about. We're all, mostly, probably, Christians here, all paid up- or buttoned up depending on what you put in the collection plate- members of the Son of God appreciation society, so let's start with a really basic question that all even vaguely dedicated members of any fan club will know. Ask a Belieber 'what does Justin look like' and they'll tell you in the tiniest detail down to the tattoo on his arm and the mole on, well he must have one somewhere. Little Monsters might not recognise Lady Gaga when she's popped out in her trackie to the 7-11 for some milk but they can definitely tell you in loving and lavish detail every look she's ever unleashed onto an astonished world. Your followers will be able to recognise you in an identity parade even if you're a musician whose fame rests on your talent rather than your looks. I'm not sure where Cliff Richard would fit in here, but there must be a specialist niche even for him somewhere.

It's one of the most basic of all the tools in our human kit, the first thing we recognise about our families (he looks just like his dad) and loved ones (I'm liking what I'm seeing) our enemies (nasty looking piece of work that one) and strangers (do I like the look of her?). Trying to relay some great piece of gossip and they just don't know who you're on about? Tell them what she looks like- you know, hair like this, about this high, about a size 12. Oh *her*. It's the elemental way we tell one person from another, which, I'm sure you'll agree, if it is rather primitive, it's a very useful skill in life. The way we looks matters to us. We spend vast amounts of time concerned with and manipulating as much as we can the way we look and it can matter a lot in this world if you look even a little bit different from everybody else.

So, having established that, down to the nitty gritty, here's your question for today.

What did Jesus look like?

No peeking at the stained glass now.

What did Jesus look like?

If you're itching to shout out 'white guy; long blonde to brunette hair- straight to about here then waving over his shoulders; beard; blue eyes' well yes, I'll give it to you. That's a fairly accurate portrait of... the statue of Zeus at Olympia. When the peoples of the Classical world started to convert to Christianity *en masse* and thought it was about time they had a picture of their Lord, they gave the incarnate God the god's face that was closest to hand: that of Zeus. Sort of stands to reason that that is what the son of God would look like. And in this corner of the world, we've largely stuck with it.

That's what they did back then because nobody at that time knew what Jesus looked like. They didn't then, and we don't either.

This is not because Jesus was walking the earth 1900 years before the invention of the Polaroid Instamatic or that he accidentally deleted all his photos when he closed his Facebook account, because it is impossible to ever close your Facebook account so we know he can't ever have had one.

Nobody knows what Jesus looks like. The most influential, the most important person who ever lived. Nobody left us a description of what he looked like, written, pictorial or otherwise. You'd have thought they might have.

It's not that back then when all this took off nobody cared what you looked like. Although the Bible stories aren't strong on visual description, we do get on occasional pen portrait. We have a vague idea of what David looks like, which, was

basically a bit of a hottie. Everybody fell for him, male and female. We know that Naman had issues with his skincare routine. We know that Goliath was tall and Zaccheaus was short. But Jesus?

Well, we know he was male, which gives us the very barest indication of what he would and would not look like, but it's not much help for our visual imaginations. Among our contemporaries, say, 'male' could cover everything from Justin Bieber to Justin Welby: it's not a lot to go on. And even then, the gospel writers don't really dwell overlong on Jesus' gender.

Nobody bothered to leave us a record of what Jesus looked like because nobody thought it was important.

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When a writer is introducing a character into a story, almost always the first thing they will do is describe their appearance. Jane Austen marks the arrival of the main love interest in *Pride and Prejudice* thus:

*'Mr Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance; but his friend Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features [and] noble mien.*

A century and a half later we meet Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*:

*She wore a slim cool black dress, black sandals, a pearl choker. For all her chic thinness, she had rough pink darkening in the cheeks. Her mouth was large, her nose upturned. A pair of dark glasses blotted out her eyes.*

Two thousand years ago [we heard] {this is} how St John's gospel introduces the central character of human history.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Twenty-one chapters later, the gospel ends, and we still don't know what he looks like.

Two useful things I think we can take from this.

The first is that when we meet Jesus, we meet a person whose words and actions are so overwhelming it becomes utterly irrelevant what he looks like. Nobody wrote down a description of what Jesus looked like because it was nothing compared to what he did and what he said. It's not simply that Jesus' words were world-changingly important. *Jesus was God's word.*

And here's the second, the more important point. The way people look matters to us. It *really* matters to us. We use it as shorthand to recognise who is our family and our friend, who is a stranger and who is an enemy, who is like us and who is not, we use it to work out where we belong and we use it to work out where someone else belongs and then how we should react to them.

But Jesus, fits into no human category and belongs to everybody and to nobody and so we cannot use the way he looks to find out where he fits.

It's true, the gospel story happens in a particular time and place: Jesus had a particular gender and a particular ethnicity. But look what happens on Easter day. After the resurrection- the lynchpin of the whole Christian story- after the resurrection nobody seemed to know what Jesus looked like. Not Mary Magdalene, not his disciple Cleopas, not Peter in the boat. They don't recognise Jesus by *looking* at him. They recognise Jesus by what he says- 'Mary'- and by what he does- breaking bread.

Around the world, the visual representation of Jesus you are most likely to come across is the long-blond haired blue-eyed bearded Jesus one. This is entirely an accident of the dominance of European missionary efforts in certain historical periods. But you will also come across Jesus with every possible visual variation- African Jesuses, Chinese Jesuses, Indian Jesuses; plain and pretty Jesuses, kindly and angry Jesuses; meek, mild and majestic Jesuses; every which way you can depict a man somebody somewhere has visualised Jesus that way. We have to picture him somehow, and we almost always picture him looking like ourselves, because that's the easiest way to envisage him as a human: someone just like us.

But we have to recognise that that's all it's about, and then leave it there. Otherwise it won't be too long before all our only too human judgments and prejudices start to sneak in. The more we more we obsess about arbitrary aspects of his appearance, the greater the temptation will be to claim him for this group or that group

Race, gender, sexual orientation, age, nationality, religion, disability, height, weight. We could fit the historical Jesus into all these categories. But why bother? What matters, what really matters, are Jesus' words and actions. Because those are the words and the actions of God.