

Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40.1-11, 2 Peter 3. 8-15a, Mark 1. 1-8.

The Face of Jesus

Just a few weeks ago Christies the art dealers sold a painting believed to be by Leonardo da Vinci for the incredible, world breaking record, of over four hundred million US dollars. The painting is of “Salvator Mundi” – Saviour of the World - and shows the face of Christ.

No doubt you, like Carrie and me, are already sending and receiving Christmas cards which will show other representations of the face of Jesus. Fortunately we will not have to spend anywhere near the amount paid for the da Vinci – although we may feel that our Christmas budget is getting near that sum!

Let’s look at some other representations of the face of Jesus.

But how can you put a price upon the face of Christ? What does it matter what Jesus looked like?

At Christmas we focus upon the face of an innocent new born baby lying in a sanitised animal trough in a warm, cosy stable.

Much as though I love Christmas with all its traditions and the amazing story of God made man, I am becoming increasingly concerned about the messages that are put across.

No doubt our church will be filled on Christmas Eve –first with the Crib Service and then for Midnight Mass. Many will attend these events who

don't otherwise set foot inside the church. With that in mind it makes me wonder just what we are offering to those visitors.

Is it just a nice cosy feeling, a tingling down the spine as we hear the soloist in 'Once In Royal David's City'? Is it a sense of continuity linking us back to our childhoods and, what seemed then, more secure times? Or are we proclaiming without any apology or embarrassment that we believe that somehow God became man in Jesus and that he is still around today, two thousand years after his traditional birth, offering new life, fresh hope, a sense of purpose for living, and a way to know God in our lives on a daily basis.

The problem is that we run the risk of selling people short by just telling them the Christmas story about the birth of Jesus but miss the chance to tell them why his birth matters.

Personally I am struggling more and more with the commercialism of Christmas and with the banal adverts that appear on our television screens telling us that we need such and such a product to make it a perfect celebration. The advert that really annoys me is, "Morrisons make Christmas." It's rubbish – "humbug"! Without the fact of Christ there is no Christmas. Without his coming into the world there is nothing to celebrate. It is Christ's Mass!

Of course there are many well intentioned Christians who will proudly proclaim "Jesus is the reason for the season!" However in making sure that the baby in a manger is at the centre of our celebrations we can easily miss out what one writer has called "the neon arrow" that points from the manger to the cross. Jesus's coming to earth 2,000 years ago

would have been nothing more than a lovely divine visit if it were not for the cross and the empty tomb.

This leads me to our Gospel reading today – the dramatic story of John the Baptist out in the wilderness proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” This is the first step of many as we become followers of Jesus. Repentance is an old fashioned word not much used outside of the church these days. But it is where we must start. It is simply acknowledging who we are – our faults and our weaknesses – and saying to God that we want to turn from that and walk in a new way that embraces God’s forgiveness and unconditional love.

Returning to the Christmas theme, it’s like the shepherds who were called to lay aside what they were and what they were doing to see the infant Christ. Of course that initial step is just a start. Time and time again we all will find ourselves in despair and having to say again “Forgive me Lord.”

But it is that initial step that commits us. It is that initial step whereby we begin our Christian lives and start our individual walk of faith. Of course it is not the same for all us. We may not all have a Damascus Road experience – a sudden conversion. But for all of there has to be a beginning. A moment in our lives, or a point of recognition, when that which we looked at from a distance – perhaps with a longing in our hearts – becomes a reality.

John Wesley summed it so well when he explained after his conversion – and let’s not forget that he was an ordained Anglican minister – how

his heart was strangely warmed. Somehow the God that he knew in his head had a living reality in the very core of his being.

It is this that is the message of Christmas. It must be this that is allowed to shine through the glitter and the tinsel and make believe of the festive season. God has stepped into history and offers each one of us a personal relationship with him.

If we are looking for the truth face of Jesus we will find it not in any painting or other human representation but in experiencing the life that he offers to all who chose to put their trust in him and become “followers of the Way” as the early Christians were known.

But let me return to the Gospel reading, it is not just forgiveness following repentance that God offers to us in Christ. John said something quite remarkable, “I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”.

What on earth does that mean? You may well ask. You might have been baptized with water, usually as baby – although it was such a joy just last week to see two people slightly more mature in years being baptized. What John is speaking of here is something more than being sprinkled at the font or immersed in water. It is even something more than turning away from our old lives.

God offers to each one of the opportunity to know the living Holy Spirit in each one of us, empowering us, guiding us, challenging us, and helping us to become more and more like Jesus and thereby being Jesus in the world today.

Let me ask you a question this morning. What is it that brings you to this place? Is it because you have always been a churchgoer? Is it because of the sense of peace that you find in this ancient building where Christians have worshipped for nearly a thousand years? Is it because you enjoy the tradition and liturgy? Is it because you enjoy the fellowship of your friends here and being with a group of likeminded friends?

All of these have meaning to them but the question this morning is have you come Christ, received him into your life and are knowing the Holy Spirit at work in your life day by day?

Do you remember that Cilla Black song “What’s it all about Alfie”? There are often times when I feel like that! What is it all about? I have to confess that I probably have more questions now in my life about God than ever before. There are times when I feel totally unworthy of his love and forgiveness. However, I know that there was a time in my life when, as it were, a light bulb was switched on. It’s difficult to explain but I know that it is also the experience of many here this morning as it has been the experience of millions of people down the ages since that first Christmas.

If ever the world needed saving it is now. I sometimes find that I just have to switch off the news, put down the newspaper. In this age of instant global communication we are bombarded with facts and information that it can be almost too much to bare.

But this is the message of Christmas. A new-born baby in animal feed stall offers hope and reconciliation. If I might be allowed to join the lines

of two familiar Christmas carols, “Oh hush the noise ye men of strife and hear the angels sing – Glory to the new born King.”

Let me return to where I started. The face of Jesus. Where can we find his face today? Of course we may see it in others around us but I suggest that when get home today, stop and pause in front of the mirror. For it is there, shining through the weariness, the pain, the sin of our individual lives, you might catch a glimpse of the Christ within each one us. For it is us today who must be the face of Christ not just this Christmas and throughout the coming days, weeks and years of our lives.

Forgiven and filled with the Holy Spirit we are the face of Jesus – and the hands and the feet and the voice - to those around us in this troubled world.

As usual there is a prayer team in the corner this morning. If you feel that you have never really known the reality of Jesus Christ in your life or if you feel that you need to be filled afresh with the Holy Spirit, then please ask the team to pray for you this morning or speak to Charleen or anyone else on the ministry team. It could be the best Christmas present you have ever been given!

Amen

