

Those disciples were in for a rollercoaster ride when they decided to follow Jesus. They had left their families, their jobs, and the security of being normal, every-day law-abiding Jews when they decided to follow this man who had called them. Today we hear how three of them followed him up a high mountain and just about had their heads blown off when Jesus was transfigured. Not only did he and his clothing become dazzling white, more white than all the borax in the world could achieve, he was surrounded by the two most holy men in the Jewish tradition, Elijah and Moses, both of whom were not considered to be dead and both of whom were expected to make a comeback. To top it all off a cloud overshadows them and from this cloud a voice, the voice of God, says to them “This is my Son, the Beloved listen to him!”

In this moment Jesus was revealing the other side of himself to those who had chosen to follow him. This is the side of the Son of God, the divine being who became incarnate and dwelt among us. We finish the Sundays after Epiphany on a high note, reminding ourselves whom it is that we have been called to follow as we enter the dark days of Lent, as we enter a season of prayer, penitence and fasting to follow our Lord on his journey to the cross.

The disciples didn’t understand what had happened on that mountain top. Jesus was proclaiming that the kingdom of God had arrived and proved his point with healing and feeding and casting out demons. These acts were powerful and attracted followers. But those followers, especially the disciples, hadn’t really heard his words about the need for suffering and death and resurrection and his expectation they would have to take up their own crosses in order to follow him. No, the disciples didn’t understand him, even after the voice of God tells them to “listen to him”, and they would persist in their misunderstanding right up through Jesus’ death on the cross, when they distinguished themselves by running away. If I am honest, I can’t say that I blame them either. Only after the resurrection would they begin to understand.

So here we are today on the last Sunday after the Epiphany. What are we to make of this dazzlingly white Jesus who was transfigured before the eyes of his disciples?

How and when have you experienced this Jesus?

I can’t tell you what Jesus should mean to you since everyone is in a different place on their faith journey but I can remind you of whom the church understands Jesus to be.

The theological work reflecting on the meaning and identity of Jesus Christ is known as Christology. Every week in the Nicene Creed we say that we believe that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, of one being with the Father, he came down from heaven and became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, he was crucified, died, buried, and rose again on the third day, he ascended into heaven, and he will come again. Each of those phrases, and I didn’t mention them all, each of them is filled with meaning addressing controversies of their time. These are definitions that were agreed to by the councils of the church between the 4th and 5th centuries. When we say we believe we are not saying that we understand these as concrete facts, like the fact that the church carpet is dark red, there are 2 candlesticks on the altar and our address is 31 Rider Avenue. No, we hold these things in faith, faith that is based on communal experience and understanding that comes alive in our hearts.

Nevertheless I can’t tell you what Jesus should mean to you since everyone is in a different place on their faith journey.

Peter, James, and John thought they had Jesus pegged, Jesus was their teacher, the one who promised them access to the kingdom of God. Imagine then how their understanding got a little shaken when he led them up on the mountain. Peter's helpful suggestion was to make three tents as if the manifestations of Elijah and Moses need a place to camp out. Beyond that, all three of them were terrified.

We know Jesus through the gospels, each of which depicts a slightly different picture of Jesus. Which one speaks to you? The wise teacher, an historical figure who inspired people, an apolitical leader who nevertheless managed to challenge the powers that be by standing up for the poor, the oppressed, and the vulnerable. What about all of those miracles? The healings, the casting out of demons, the feeding of the 5,000, the walking on water, and the calming of the storm? Was that real? Or is it easier to think of Jesus as a really good man who suffered an unjust fate? The Jesus who walks with us, who suffered the little children to come to him in a time when children were not valued?

Because of Jesus we have an intimate relationship with God, a relationship that unites us with the covenant that God made with the people of Israel and that as Christians we see as the fulfillment of that covenant. In that covenant the whole world is invited into that relationship wherein we are forgiven and reconciled and promised eternal life. Jesus exists in human time and before time and will be there at the end of time. He is that God of two natures, both human and divine, something we express intellectually but is really a mystery, a mystery that the disciples experienced in the Transfiguration. As God, Jesus is also the second person of the Holy Trinity, that relational God who has revealed Godself to us in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... and that's a whole other conversation.

This God who became incarnate was fully human. He lived and breathed and suffered and died as one of us. One of the Early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus, said *"That which he has not assumed, he has not healed."* Gregory is saying that in order for the world to be redeemed, Jesus had to become a vulnerable human being, he had to short-circuit the sin which plagues us all even while being rejected and tortured and put to death. If Jesus had tried to do this as a God, it wouldn't have the same meaning because the sacrifice wouldn't have been real. Only as a human being could he transcend violence and evil by resisting the impulse to react in kind. It is a paradox that Jesus defeats death by going to his own death. While on many levels the reason he suffered and died is incomprehensible we understand that in his obedience unto death Jesus reconciled us to God and the success of his sacrifice is revealed in the resurrection.

Jesus modeled for us the behavior that is expected in the kingdom of God that was inaugurated with his incarnation: obedience, compassion, faithfulness, generosity, non-violence, and love. It's a hard act to follow. The church has not always brought out the best in who God intended us to be. It was Mahatma Gandhi who said *"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."*

But there is always tomorrow. In our baptismal covenant we promise that when we fall into sin we will repent and return to the Lord. Jesus taught us to pray to his Father in his name. Most of us could recite the Lord's Prayer backwards and forwards and those words "Forgive us our trespasses..." can take on new meaning.

This promise of forgiveness can be reassuring because we are also told that Jesus is the one who will come in judgment. Prayer and repentance is not insurance but prayer changes us and gives us the strength to go on to try to live life as Jesus would have us live it, in the knowledge and love of God and with the lens that the kingdom of God is here.

Wherever you on your faith journey I urge you to take this Lent as an opportunity to go deeper into your relationship with Jesus, not only walking with him in his suffering, and marveling at his discipline and obedience but also keeping in mind the dazzling white of his true nature, the Jesus we all hope to see when the time is right - now and in the days to come.

Amen.