

Pictures of Jesus

1. Jesus and the Catacombs

In our service today we are going to look at different pictures of Jesus. Looking at how people have depicted Jesus, we can discover new things about Jesus which can challenge us and help us to understand more.

The first picture was found in the underground catacombs in Rome. The catacombs were used by the early Christians as a place to bury their dead. Large tunnels were carved underground as places to bury and they were also used to hold commemoration services. This was especially true during times when Christians were persecuted.



This image of Jesus is from about the year AD375. The early Christians were reluctant to make pictures of Christ, so this early painting is very rare.

Jesus is dressed here in the robes of a philosopher. In Roman times, he was often painted in this way, because many early Christian writers taught that Jesus had out-

philosophised even the greatest of the ancient philosophers. His way of wisdom fulfilled the best that thinkers such as Plato and Socrates had hoped for. To follow Jesus lets us discover the true meaning of life.

There are two Greek letters on either side of the head of Jesus : alpha and omega, the A and Z of the Greek alphabet. Here the artist is echoing words from the New Testament...

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty... To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life" (Revelation 1:8, 21:6).

The artist has included the alpha and omega letters as a way of saying that Jesus is much more than the greatest of the philosophers – he is God, living on earth as a human being. This is especially appropriate as a painting in one of the catacombs, because it was here that people buried their dead and mourned them. As they looked up at this image, they would have been comforted by knowing that they were now with Christ, "who is, and who was, and who is to come".

2. The Hinton St Mary Mosaic



This magnificent mosaic is from Roman Britain and dates from the 4th century AD. It was discovered in the village of Hinton St Mary in Dorset in 1963. This Roman mosaic of Christ was discovered during the excavation of a British villa. The mosaic was unearthed in 1963 when the village blacksmith came across it by accident whilst digging a hole for his wife's washing line. What makes the mosaic historically significant is a depiction in the central roundel of what is thought to be the earliest representation of Christ yet found in Britain. It is the only such portrait mosaic on a mosaic floor discovered in the Roman Empire.

Jesus is at the centre complete with Chi-Rho symbol, these are the Greek letters chi and rho, the first two letters of Christ's name. Placed together as a monogram they formed the normal symbol for Christianity at this time. Christ is portrayed as a clean-shaven man. It is marvellous to think that as early as the 4th century there was such a spread of Christianity.

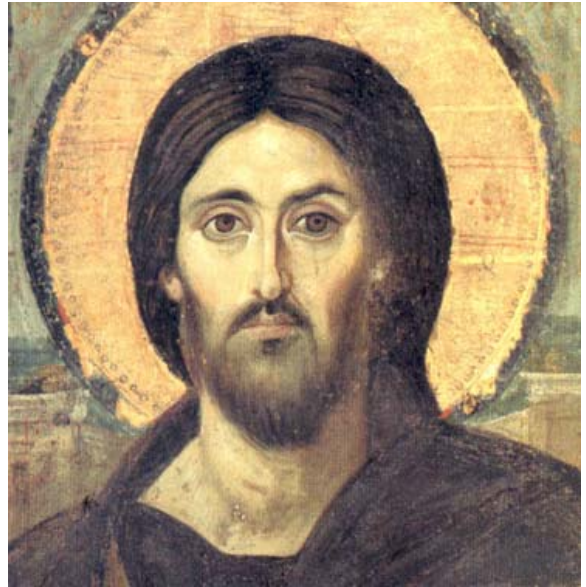


3. Jesus the Eastern Icon

Icons are pictures used to help people to pray. The icon was like a spiritual window to help people to be drawn closer to God. That is why Jesus is looking straight out at us. It is as if he is calling us to respond to him, calling us to come home to God.

Of course over the years icons have been destroyed by people who think that such images are wrong. This is one of the few really old images to have survived and it dates from the 6th century. This is the classic Eastern image of Jesus. It does not show us a white-skinned, blue-eyed

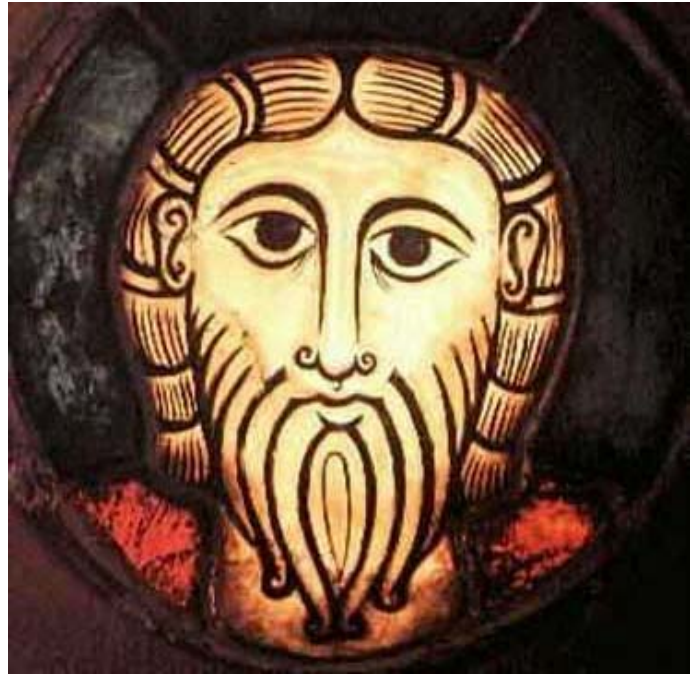
Jesus, but a man from the Eastern Mediterranean, with olive skin and brown eyes. His face is strong – he is someone to be reckoned with. This famous icon has been kept in the monastery at the foot of Mt Sinai for centuries.



4. Jesus in Stained Glass

Over 900 years old, experts date it to about the year 1070, and it comes from an abbey church in the borderland between France and Germany on the River Rhine.

Stained glass was used in churches to teach people about the Christian faith – many windows told stories from the Bible and from the lives of the saints – and to make people aware of the presence of God with them. The rich colours of the glass must have had a stunning effect on ordinary people.



The face of Jesus in this image is calm and without feeling. This is because artists of the time wanted to emphasise the majesty of Christ as the ruler of creation. They wanted to show him as God. Pictures which expressed the human, suffering side of Jesus only came later. St Francis of Assisi, who lived some 150 years after this stained glass image was made, was a key figure in helping people to see Jesus in a more human light.

The simplicity, confidence and calm about this face of Jesus express an important Christian belief: Jesus, as ruler of creation, is above every earthly power – good and evil. Our lives and our stories are in his hands.

5. Holmann Hunt

If you go to Oxford and visit Keeble College Chapel, then you can see this picture. Holmann Hunt painted this picture three times during his life and said that working on it the first time had made him become a Christian. The final version (shown here) is life-sized. and was painted in 1853.

It is called 'The Light of the World' and it is probably the most famous of all Victorian religious paintings. It illustrates a passage from the book of Revelations *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.* The disused and overgrown door is a symbol of the human soul ignorant or impervious to Christ's teaching, and the light from his lantern embodies conscience on the one hand and salvation on the other.

Jesus, crowned with thorns and carrying a lantern, stands outside at night, knocking on a closed door that is covered with weeds. Holman Hunt's famous painting is full of symbolism, but the main idea, of Jesus knocking on a door, is taken straight from a passage in the book of Revelation...



"Listen! I am standing and knocking at your door. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will eat together" (Revelation 3:20).

Holman Hunt later explained the meaning of the painting's symbolism: "The closed door was the obstinately shut mind; the weeds the cumber of daily neglect, the accumulated hindrance of sloth; the bat flitting about only in darkness was a natural symbol of ignorance..." The lantern Jesus carries (click here to see the full-length image) refers to Jesus's description of himself as "the light of the world", which is the title of the painting.

6. Jesus and the BBC

This image of Christ was generated by computer as a 3D computer model. This was made specially for a BBC programme broadcast during Easter 2001, called Son of God.

The head of Jesus was created by a production team which took into consideration medical, archaeological, geographical and artistic evidence from the time of Jesus.



The Son of God production team worked with a 1st-century male skull found in Israel. "Jewish heads are very different today to 2000 years ago, so the team looked for a Jewish skull from the period of Jesus," they said.

Using a plaster cast of the skull, forensic medical artist Richard Neave from the University of Manchester began to reconstruct the face by building up layers of clay to represent muscle, fat and skin. Details such as the hair were decided by considering the hair of men in the Middle East, which tends to be thick, dark and curly, together with hairstyles current in the time of Jesus.

7. Jesus the revolutionary

You may be more familiar with this picture from the poster made of Che Guevara. Since his death in 1967, the face of the Latin American revolutionary, Che Guevara, has stared down from posters and banners around the world. In his death he became a focus for the kind of desperate revolutionary action that seemed to millions of young people the only hope of destroying the world of bourgeois industrial capitalism.

The face of Christ was deliberately modelled on Che Guevara by the Churches Advertising Network (CAN) to promote churchgoing on Easter Day. The advertising campaign generated strong criticism and accusations that it was sacrilegious. Indeed, some critics have said it is verging on blasphemy to associate Jesus with a violent revolutionary leader.

Che Guevara believed that revolution could be achieved only by armed insurrection. He was aggressive, clever and successful. He was Fidel Castro's closest aide in the Cuban revolution. He was also actively involved spreading Communism by revolution in many African countries.

However, Che's zeal and intransigence led to his downfall. His final adventure was in Bolivia where he grossly misjudged its revolutionary potential; he was captured by the army and shot.

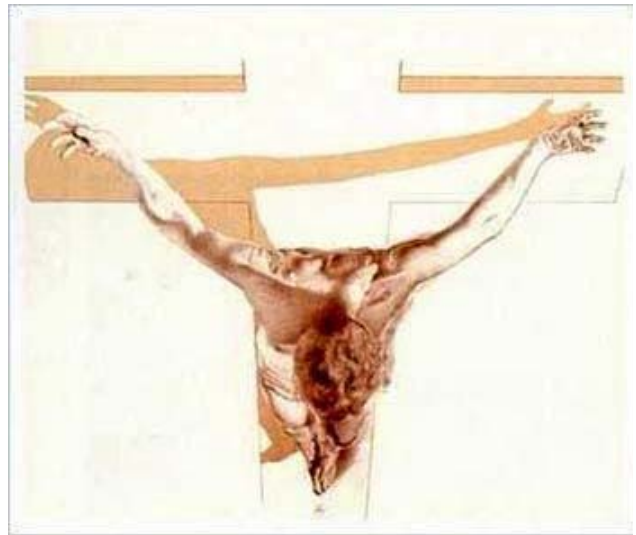
Because of his wild, romantic appearance, his dashing style, and his dedication to violent, flamboyant action, Che became a legend and an idol for the discontented youth of the late sixties and early seventies. Ironically, his martyrdom spawned a worldwide industry producing T-shirts, posters and all kinds of memorabilia and the sale of his image has become a huge commercial success.

The Revd Dr Tom Ambrose, Secretary of CAN and Communications Officer for Ely Diocese, defended the poster. "Jesus was not crucified for being meek and mild," he said. CAN put the revolutionary cat among the Christian pigeons, but in doing so they reminded us of the power that lies in the person of Jesus to transform society for the better. The challenge to Christians here at Christ's is to make sure our worship and life lives up to this message. Meek and mild, as if!



8. Jesus Crucified.

This picture of the crucifixion is by Salvador Dali. Traditionally the image of the crucified Christ has not been seen in many denominations. The empty cross of the resurrected Jesus is preferred to that of a cross with a human Christ being killed. However many Christians have found the image of the crucified Jesus to be a powerful way of understanding the meaning of the death of Jesus.



Jesus spoke of himself being lifted up on the cross and drawing us to himself. Jesus spoke of Moses lifting up a serpent in the desert during the Exodus when people were being bitten by deadly poisonous snakes. Many died - but those who looked at the bronze snake on a staff that Moses lifted up survived, they were cured of the effects of the snake bite. The cure which Moses provided was a miraculous spiritual event, it was God's way of saving the people, all they had to do was trust in the cure provided.

That action of Moses became a visual demonstration of what was later to take place on the cross. We all know the bad news, that humanity is poisoned by sin. Fortunately there is also good news, that Jesus is an antidote for sin. He becomes for us just like the bronze snake on a staff, when we look at Jesus and put our trust in him we find God's cure for all that is wrong in our world. There is no medicine which we can manufacture to cure the evil poison which infects humanity, but Jesus is the cure God has provided for the sin and evil. God looks at his poisoned world, but instead of condemning it, he provides the means whereby it can be healed and saved. This is not something we do - it is entirely the work of God, his gift to us. So Jesus calls for us to look at his cross and see that he has taken all the world's darkness upon himself and in so doing we are miraculously healed. Thank God.

Today we finish with a verse from a hymn as we contemplate the image of Christ on the cross.

He left his Father's throne above –
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me!