

# THE FACE OF CHRIST



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## "WE WISH TO SEE JESUS"

The first Holy Week had already begun when some Greeks came to Philip saying that they wished to see Jesus (Jn 12:21). It is ironical that, a few days later, Philip was told that he himself had not really seen Jesus! "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me? (Jn 14:9)

Philip had asked, "Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied" (14:8). Thomas made a similar request: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" In both cases, Jesus replies by pointing to himself: To Thomas he said, "I am the way..." (Jn 14:6); and to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9).

Jesus expresses disappointment. Their questions showed that they did not really know him.

His response is not just a rebuke; it is an invitation. The answer to their questions is that they can only begin to know the way and they can only begin to see the Father, *by knowing Jesus*. He was saying to them: you need to know me better.

This does not happen easily or automatically. He was, after all, speaking to people who had lived closely with him, who had heard him speak of his Father, who had listened to his parables and seen his approach to people, who had witnessed his healing, his mercy and his forgiveness. If, after all of that, they did not know him, we surely cannot imagine that this knowledge will come to us without prayer and effort.

We have only one Teacher, Jesus Christ (Mt 23:10). He teaches us about the way and about his Father. But *only by knowing him can we learn what he teaches*. What he teaches us is not just facts or doctrines – the sort of information that can be picked up in unlimited quantities from the Internet. What he teaches is not just something to be taken in by our minds. What he teaches us is a relationship with him. Above all he teaches us **himself**.

Jesus, our Teacher,  
we have heard your Word; we call ourselves your followers,  
but, like Philip, we do not know you as we should.  
Help us, this Lent, to come to know you better,  
and to follow you more generously.  
May we make the request of the Greek pilgrims our own:  
'We wish to see Jesus',  
and search for you with all our hearts.

## THE FACE OF GOD

In other words, Jesus is not simply the light who enables us to see the truth. He **IS God's truth** shining in the world. That is how he is described in the first verses of St John's Gospel: "the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (Jn 1:9). And St Paul says that we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord because "it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

The question that the Greek pilgrims put to Philip is still addressed to us. It is the question that expresses the world's most crying need. The world, which sorely needs to see Jesus, even if it often fails to realise it, depends on us, the followers of Christ, sent by him to make disciples of all the nations:

"How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14,15).

We are the ones who are sent to proclaim Jesus to the world. If he is not visible in our lives, where can people see him? The light of Christ is meant to shine in the world through the lives of Christians. The light cannot shine through us unless we allow it to shine first into our own

hearts. Our witness to the world would be “hopelessly inadequate if we ourselves had not first *contemplated his face*” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* [NMI] 16).

What is entirely unique about Christianity is summed up in the response to Philip: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not know that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?"(Jn 14:9,10) In the Old Testament, even Moses was told by God, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Ex 33:20). But when we wish to see the infinite, invisible God, we contemplate a human face, the face of Jesus who has called us not his servants but his friends (Jn 15:15).

Christianity is not just another example of the religious sense, the desire for God, the human quest to discover the ultimate meaning of life, which is found in all cultures and all periods of history. The core of Christianity is that God has come to meet us, fulfilling the human search for God beyond all expectations, beyond the wildest imagination. He spoke "in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:1,2).

At a particular time, in a particular place, the Son of God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity became one of us: "He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved" (*Gaudium et Spes* 22). From all eternity, the eternal Word is the perfect image of his Father. Now in first century Palestine, the invisible God reveals himself to us in a human being who is the eternal Word. God is seen in human actions, in a human voice, in a human face.

This is the foundation on which Christian faith rests – not the lofty ethical values that the Church teaches, not its cultural achievements, not its world wide spread, not even the sanctity of many of Christ’s followers. Our faith is founded on Jesus Christ, God and Man, who lived and died and rose for us: "For [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9,10).

O Word you are Lord and God,  
you are the light by which the light was made;  
you are the way, the truth and the life,  
in which there is no darkness, nor error, nor emptiness, nor death;  
light without whom there is only darkness,  
way outside of which there is only error,  
truth without which there is only emptiness,  
life without which there is only death,  
speak a word, Lord: “let there be light”,  
so that I may see the light and avoid the darkness,  
see the way and avoid all straying  
see the truth and avoid the emptiness,  
see the light and avoid death. (St Augustine)

### CONTEMPLATING THE FACE OF CHRIST

That is why all pastoral renewal has to be built on holiness (NMI 30) – that is, on knowing Jesus better and being more closely united with him.

This is one of the key ideas running through the Holy Father’s marvellous letter marking the close of the Jubilee Year. He reflects on the daunting challenge of bringing the Gospel to the world of the twenty-first century and says that in order to do that we need to *contemplate the face of Christ*. There is no other way of responding to his call. This was what Pope John Paul said to the youth of Ireland during his visit in 1979:

[Christ’s] call is demanding, because he invites you to let yourselves be ‘captured’ by him completely, so that your whole lives will be seen in a different light. He is the Son of God who reveals to you the loving face of the Father.

Jesus Christ is, as Pope John Paul puts it, “the absolute foundation” of all our pastoral activity. Contemplating the face of Christ is the fundamental task of every Christian:

To look upon the face of Christ, to recognise its mystery amid the daily events and sufferings of his human life and then to grasp the divine splendour definitively revealed in the Risen Lord, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father: this is the task of every follower of Christ... (*Rosarium Virginis Mariae* 6)

One very basic way of doing that is by reading and reflecting on the Gospels. We have largely lost the ability to reflect on and savour a text, except perhaps if we are reading poetry. The world is so dominated by facts and information that we tend to “speed read”, picking out the bits of information that we don’t already know and that we think might prove valuable. A friend of mine once said to me that speed-reading is at its most useful in dealing with something that has been speed-written!

When we hear the Gospel on a Sunday or set out to read a Gospel passage, there is a temptation to say to ourselves, “Oh yes, I know that; I’ve heard that before”, and to move on to something else, rather as we might skip over a story in the newspaper if we have already heard it on the radio. But we should be reading the Gospels like letters from a loved one who is away from home, repeatedly reading the text, savouring the words, trying to detect how he or she is really feeling and so on.

We should treasure what we can learn of Jesus, even when it seems that we don’t have the amount of information that we would like to have, for instance about his infancy and young adulthood. But we can come to know him by reflecting on how he presented his Father’s kingdom,

- ❑ challenging the complacent but reaching out to the outcasts;
- ❑ teaching the highest standards of love (love one another as I have loved you, as my Father loves me), yet welcoming sinners;
- ❑ healing sickness and forgiving sin, yet being himself willing to accept pain and death for our sins and in order to fulfil his Father’s plan to save the world.

It is wonderful that various ways of learning about Jesus through the scriptures have become more widespread in the Church in recent years. I think of *lectio divina*, and the seven-step method with which many people in the diocese have begun to be familiar.

In Jesus, we human beings enter into a new relationship with God, because, in him, God has entered a new relationship with us. We have become members of the family of God because we are united to God’s eternal Son. That is the purpose of Christ’s mission – to draw humanity into the family of God; that is the mission we have received from him – to preach the Gospel to the world:

His command to the apostles was to preach the Gospel to all nations in order that the human race would become the family of God...

As the firstborn of many, and by the gift of his Spirit, he established, after his death and resurrection, a new community of sisters and brothers among all who received him in faith and love; this is the communion of his own body, the church...

This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day when it will be brought to fulfilment; on that day, humanity, saved by grace, will offer perfect glory to God as the family beloved of God and of Christ their Brother (*Gaudium et Spes* 32).

God our Father,  
you sent your Son to be our brother  
so that we might become your sons and daughters.  
May our hearts be set on fire  
by the mystery of his life, death and resurrection  
and may we play our part in the mission you have given us  
to share that good news with the world.

## THE GIFT OF FAITH

Knowing the truth that Jesus is the new relationship of humanity with God is not just a matter of recognising the beauty of his life or the truth of his moral teaching or even his deep commitment to his Father. Nor is it a matter of saying simply that God loves us and that we are in some vague sense God's children.

Jesus asked his disciples what people thought of him, who they thought he was. They answered that some people said he was John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But, he asked, "Who do you say that I am?" When Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Jesus told him that this had been revealed to him, "by my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 13:20). Only the gift of faith makes it possible to recognise the truth about Jesus.

In other words, we do not come to the truth about Jesus Christ simply by our own efforts. The truth is greater and more astonishing than the human mind could ever imagine:

Only the experience of silence and prayer offers the proper setting for the growth and development of a true, faithful and consistent knowledge of that mystery which finds its culminating expression in the solemn proclamation by the Evangelist Saint John: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (1:14) (NMI 20).

In Jesus God and human beings are related in an utterly unique way. Here is a Person who is fully God and fully man. No closer unity between God and humanity is imaginable – indeed we could never have imagined the incarnation until it actually happened. It remains the deepest of mysteries, but it is the meaning of our lives. Our sharing in the life of God comes about through being united with him in his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

We can hear these words without ever really understanding that they are not just one important truth among the many, they state the most important truth about us and about the whole world. Jesus has been with us so long and yet we do not know him.

The apostles followed the path that we try to follow when we reflect on the Gospels. They became aware of the extraordinary relationship that he claimed with his Father. St Luke describes him from his early life as giving priority to his Father's business over everything else (Lk 2:49). St Matthew records him as saying, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Mt 11:27). St John attributes to him the clear claims, "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30), "I am in the Father and the Father in me" (10:38); "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58).

They saw in his signs and miracles that the Kingdom was one of abundant love and healing and forgiveness. They heard his preaching about the love of his Father and the unlimited demands of loving God and neighbour in return.

The conversation with Philip and Thomas at the Last Supper shows that, even having seen these unique events, it is still necessary to go on reflecting and praying, in order to know Jesus better. Jesus, therefore, makes a promise to the apostles that the Father will send the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus to, "teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26) and to "guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13)

The relationship of the apostles with him was as disciples with their teacher, but also as friends (15:12-15). It was a personal relationship:

Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level, it is the giving of self in love. Christ's communication was, in fact, spirit and life (*Communio et Progressio* [1971] 11).

The power of his teaching can only be explained by the fact that "his words, his parables and his arguments are never separable from his life and his very being" (*Catechesi Tradendae* 9). That is why they cannot be known without knowing him.

God our Father,  
pour out the gifts of your Holy Spirit on the world.  
You sent the Holy Spirit on your Church  
to begin the teaching of the Gospel:  
now let the Spirit continue to work in the world  
through the hearts of all who believe.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever. Amen

### THE FACE OF A CHILD

When we first see the face of Jesus in the Gospels, it is the face of a Baby. This is the most astonishing truth. The poet, Robert Southwell expresses the wonder of it:

Behold the Father is his daughter's son,  
The bird that built the nest is hatched therein,  
The old of years an hour has not outrun,  
Eternal life to live doth now begin,  
The Word is dumb, the mirth of heaven doth weep,  
Might feeble is and force doth faintly creep.

When God came to us it was not in the overwhelming power and majesty of a mighty ruler, but as a little Baby. Of course, even the most massive army or the most resplendent ruler would fall just as infinitely short of God's power and glory as everything else in creation.

Nevertheless, the fact that he chose to come as a little child shows something of how he wishes to reveal himself and how he wants us to respond. This is not a face to terrify us, but a face to attract and encourage us.

Yet behind the warmth and wonder of the birth and infancy of Jesus, there is an ominous note – the violent hostility of Herod and Simeon's warning that a sword would pierce his mother's soul (Lk 2:35). Already we see a Child who is destined to suffer, for whom nothing can take precedence over carrying his Father's business (Lk 2:49). He has become one with us in everything except sin. He has become one with the children of the world who suffer starvation and lack of health care, the effects of war, abortion, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, exile and exploitation. Jesus is not someone who is "unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15).

Lord Jesus Christ,  
Word of God, through whom the universe was made,  
you came to us as a tiny child,  
powerless and vulnerable,  
to show the greatness of your love.  
May we understand that your vulnerability  
makes inescapable our duty  
to all the vulnerable children of the earth  
and to be instruments of your loving care for them.

### THE FACE OF THE ONE TEACHER

Jesus is our only Teacher (Jn 14:6). We obviously learn a great deal from one another and from the experience of life. But he is rightly called the only Teacher because *he is the Truth*, the most fundamental truth about who we are and who we are called to be. He is the fullest revelation of the God who made the universe. Every other truth we learn is an aspect of the fundamental truth which is found in the Word through whom the universe was made.

When he teaches the law of God, the will of his Father, it is not just as a set of rules, however good and true. The rich young man asks what he should do to possess eternal life, and Jesus points first to the Ten Commandments (Mt 19:16-19). But then he goes on to challenge the young man to sell his possessions and “*come, follow me*” (Mt 19:21). That is what doing the will of God fundamentally means. “(The Father) destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Eph 1: 5,6). The law remains binding, but, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it, we “are invited to rediscover it in the person of (our) Master who is its perfect fulfilment” (CCC 2053).

The same is true for all the other laws and rules in the Bible. They are no longer to be understood simply as words written on tablets of stone. We are to find them written “upon the heart of the Servant [Jesus] who becomes a covenant to the people (CCC 580).

In a similar way, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the Beatitudes are at the heart of the preaching of Jesus. Then it adds that the Beatitudes depict the face of Jesus Christ and portray his charity (1717). Jesus is not just pointing to abstract qualities that we ought have, he is pointing to himself the One who is poor in spirit, who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for justice, who is merciful, who is pure in heart, who is a peacemaker and who is persecuted. It is in Jesus, the Man of the Beatitudes *par excellence*, that the kingdom of heaven comes fully into being on earth. It is in him that the Kingdom will flourish in endless glory in heaven.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in Christ  
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,  
even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world,  
that we should be holy and blameless before him...  
For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight  
the mystery of his will,  
according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ  
as a plan for the fullness of time,  
to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.  
(Eph 1:3,4,9,10)

## AGONISED FACE

When we look on the agonised face of Jesus on the cross, we see the extraordinary paradox – the Word who is eternally present in the endless, infinite joy of the Blessed Trinity, at the same time crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34) Perhaps the only glimpse we have of this paradox is in the lives of the saints and of those who grow in prayer, when they experience what is called the dark night of the soul.

At the end of her life, St Therese of Lisieux suffered greatly, but she could glimpse how Jesus could at once be in agony and also in the infinite joy of the Trinity: “It is a mystery”, she said, “but I assure you that, on the basis of what I am myself feeling, I can understand something of it” (*Last Conversations*, quoted in NMI 27).

St Thérèse had as her full religious name, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face. She dedicated herself to Christ not just as the infant of Bethlehem and Nazareth but also as the agonised condemned man who, according to the ancient tradition, left the imprint of his face on the veil of Veronica. Her sister, Pauline (Mother Agnes) said, “As tender as was her devotion to the Child Jesus, it cannot be compared to her devotion to the Holy Face” (*St Therese of Lisieux, Her Last Conversations*, tr John Clark, ICS Publications Washington DC, 1977, p. 13). The end of her life involved two years of horrific pain but also of deep darkness and dreadful temptations against faith. She describes hearing a voice which mocked her faith:

You really believe, do you, that the mist which hangs about you will clear later on? All right, all right, go on longing for death! But death will make a nonsense of your hopes; it will mean a night darker than ever; the night of mere non-existence (*The Autobiography of a Saint*, [AS] Fontana 1958, p. 201).

But she went on believing through the darkness: “The only thing I badly want now is to go on loving till I die of love” (AS, p. 202)

Such sharp tension between deep faith and deep darkness may not strike particular people with such power very often, yet the reality of human life is that it is full of such heights and depths, even if not often in one person at the same time. The world is full of pain, sorrow, and injustice, and there is also great joy, beauty, celebration and generosity. The saints show us that only in prayer, in contemplation of the face of Christ, can this paradox be lived, even if it can never be resolved in this life, which will always remain a mixture of fragility and hope.

When life seems harsh, when things look bleak, there is no refuge in mere optimism. Things may indeed turn out even more disastrously than our worst fears. But God is love and we are in the hands of the infinitely loving God whose love is stronger than any disaster. The darkness of the death of Jesus was the prelude to the glory of the new creation.

Lord Jesus Christ,  
on the cross we see you  
despised, rejected and acquainted with grief.  
You have carried the sorrows of the human race;  
you were bruised for our iniquities (Is 53).  
Grant that in your agonised face  
we may see both the evil of our sins  
and the greatness of your love.

#### **FACE OF THE RISEN CHRIST**

The face of Jesus to which we in the Church now look is the face of one who has suffered like us, but it is the face of the Risen Lord. “Death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9). His meeting with us welcomes us and promises us new life. It also invites us to admit our failures and to open ourselves to the forgiving love of God. Peter proclaimed his love three times to parallel his three-fold denial.

Above all the face Jesus is the face of the One who leads us on the road to the glory which he had with his Father before the world was made (Jn 17:5). He went on to say at the Last Supper, “I have given [that glory] to them, that they may be one even as we are one” (Jn 17:22).

Thomas wanted to know the way and was told that Jesus is the way. Now it is he who sums up what that really means. After the resurrection he would not believe until he saw the wounds. He touched the humanity of Jesus, the pierced hands and side, the signs of vulnerability and death – and he proclaimed his faith that this man who had suffered and died is the Word through whom all things were made: “My Lord, and my God” (Jn 20:27,28). The broken and risen body is the body of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

To put it another way, Thomas recognised that the Divine and Eternal Son took flesh. His flesh was not just a disguise or an outward appearance but his own human body. At the same time, Philip was, no doubt, learning more fully than he had ever thought possible that he who sees this body is seeing the perfect image of the Father. They were seeing what St Paul called, “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2Cor 4:6).

Jesus is the way. In teaching us to know him, he teaches us to know ourselves. One of the passages of Vatican II that is most often quoted by Pope John Paul is the one that says:

It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear... Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling (*Gaudium et Spes* 22).

The question of Thomas, “How can we know the way?” is answered only by knowing Jesus, the Way. The mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is one that we will never fully know. And so the challenge remains for us, day by day, to seek him and to try to recognise him in the steps that we take along the way.



Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,  
grant that all of us may love you more,  
as in ourselves we live the mysteries of your life again,  
from your conception and birth,  
to your cross and resurrection.  
Be with us through these mysteries;  
be with us in the Holy Spirit.  
Help us to change the direction  
of the increasing threats and misfortunes of the world today.  
Lift us up again; protect nations and peoples.  
O Lord Jesus Christ,  
show us how much more powerful  
in us and in the world  
is the work of your redemption" (John Paul II)

### **"HOW CAN WE KNOW THE WAY?"**

In the diocese we are attempting to reflect on the question that Thomas asked and to recognise Jesus, the Way, as our companion on our journey. The core of that effort cannot be plans and projects. The core of it is to recognise our companion as the disciples did at Emmaus. It is above all in the breaking of the bread, in the Eucharist, that he comes to us. The Mass is the summit and the source of our lives as Catholics. It is there that we will find the strength and the inspiration that we undoubtedly need.

Many of the signs and statistics suggest that the life of the Church community in Ireland is in decline. It is certainly under pressure in ways that we could not have anticipated a few decades ago. We are more aware of our weaknesses and failures. We are less assured of what the future holds for the Church. But that also means that we are more aware of our dependence on God our Father, more aware of our need to rely on the presence of Christ with us and that power of the Holy Spirit within us. That is a good start!

Jesus, the Way, is with us on the road. If we travel with him, even though we may sometimes experience a Calvary, we are travelling towards the glory which he had with his Father before the world was made. May we trust his promise to be with us on our journey

+Donal Murray  
Lent 2003