

Picturing Jesus in the Imagination

A Reflection on Picturing Jesus in Prayer

Reflections The Person and Work of Christ 24 January 2025

I have often contemplated the theological implications surrounding the display of images that purport to represent Jesus Christ. Notably, none of those who accompanied Him or beheld Him within the crowds felt it necessary to create a portrait of Him, especially considering that the modern phenomenon of self-portraiture did not exist during His earthly ministry. Thus, the artists who render such depictions do so from their imagination and creative expression rather than from direct observation. The representations of Jesus vary widely, from portrayals of Him as a youthful figure to others depicting Him as an elderly man.

When individuals seek to connect with Jesus in the sacred acts of prayer and meditation, they often rely on a mental image as a focal point. Frequently, this image is influenced by the artwork they have encountered and the scriptural accounts they have studied in the Gospels. The challenge lies in the effort to mentally construct an image that encapsulates the qualities of compassion, forgiveness, empathy, divinity, and, above all, love. Figures such as Peter, John, and James were among the few who witnessed the full manifestation of these attributes in Jesus during the Transfiguration event. I imagine that if they were asked to describe His physical appearance soon after, they might find it difficult to articulate any distinct features.

From my perspective, a meaningful approach to this issue is to form a conception of Jesus based on the aspects that resonate most deeply with the individual. Personally, I envision Him as the Good Shepherd, focusing on His role and essence rather than a specific facial representation. One could also reflect upon Him in pivotal moments—such as His crucifixion, His act of walking on water, or His healing of the sick.

Ultimately, it is important to recognise that paintings are merely artistic interpretations, and while they may evoke feelings or inspire reflection, they do not capture the entirety of Jesus Christ's essence or nature.