

The Face of Jesus

- Holy Thursday, 2017
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Jesus had gathered many times in a fellowship meal with his disciples. It was a regular part of the fellowship of master and disciples in the villages of Galilee. He has now come to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover with these disciples. He knows that the days have arrived when he will be put to death. He now gathers once again in a fellowship meal, but this one he knows is the last one. What did Jesus feel at this moment? What did he want? What did he choose?

I invite all of us this evening, as we too have this our own fellowship meal with Jesus and enter into these days with him, to seek to see the face of Jesus, to look upon him with all that we know of him from scripture, from our faith, and from the Spirit within us revealing him to us. Let's look on the face of Jesus this night.

There is a painting of the washing of the feet which I particularly love. It is by the German artist Sieger Koder among his paintings illustrating the bible. (You can Google it.) It looks like two large figures huddled in a heap. Peter in brown robe is bent over the figure of Jesus in white, as Jesus crouches beneath Peter washing his feet in a basin. We don't see the faces of Peter or of Jesus... except that in the water of the basin, with Peter's two big feet in the bottom of it, there is a reflection on the surface of the water of the face of Jesus. The face of Jesus: What did it show at that moment of his attitude, his sentiments, his feelings, his intentions, his choices?

Today's gospel says Jesus, fully realizing that this final hour had come and that he was going to the Father, in this moment loved these disciples, loved them to the very end of his life. Fully trusting and abandoned to the father, he bent low over that basin to wash the feet of his disciples, and came to Peter. See in his face that awareness of the end, that love, that trust, that intent to go forward, regardless of however he felt, with his choice to show his love fully in the washing so that they would know his love in his dying. How do we in our faith see this on the face of Jesus?

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews sees the face of Jesus a bit differently. He writes: "Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the Father." This is a face with joy set before it, focused on that joy, enduring the fear, the pain, the humiliation, the abandonment of his dying, despising all of that, making little of it, in light of the assured joy in the Father to whom through all of this he is coming. Can we see that joy deep in the eyes of Jesus, and on the surface of his face that intent, that choice to endure, to make little of what looms large, that focus on the Father?

I don't think anyone captures more concretely the face of Jesus in his hour than does the poet Denise Levertov:

"A dark, still young, very intelligent face,

a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
 in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
 The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
 that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
 cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
 like any mortal hero out of his depth,
 like anyone who has taken a step too far
 and wants herself back.

Can we see on the face of Jesus reflected in the basin, at the table, later on this night in the garden and looking upon us now, this dread, this grimace and clenching of teeth, this insistent but rejected urge to renege, to not go through with it, to let it pass? How does this show on the face of Christ? How does it join with joy and with love and with trust?

How important it is for us at this moment but also at any moment to know the face of Christ, what his face is toward us, how he looks upon us? Of course it is not a matter of seeing that face with our eyes or even with the eyes of our imagination, nor what's in paintings or poems. Rather it is a matter of looking upon that beloved face with the eyes of our faith as he looks on us. It makes all the difference in the world how in faith we look upon the face of Jesus looking on us.

A little psychological experiment I learned of recently brought this home to me. It is called "The Still Face Experiment". (You can Google that too!) In the experiment a mother looks joyfully, lovingly, expressively, feelingly, playfully, fully engagingly, relationally on her one-year-old child, her face just one foot from his face. The child lights up, laughs, reaches out, smiles, plays, gurgles for joy, claps his hands. Then—as instructed in the experiment—the mother looks away for a moment, and when she turns her head back to look again at her child she is expressionless, not stern, just vacant, unconnected, empty, still, even as she looks right into the eyes of her child. The child immediately shows anxiety, consternation, struggles desperately to engage her, squirms, frowns, screeches, cries, until she brings the experiment to a close by lovingly re-engaging with him feelingly. (It is a brutal experiment; I could barely stand it by the time it ended in two minutes. I wept watching it.) How important to us are the faces of our mothers for our very life, feeling, relating, security, identity, our very sense of ourselves?

So too how important is the face of Jesus known in faith, looking upon us, for our very life, our even more full life than that of a child, our truest, deepest, eternal life in God. Seeing how Jesus looks on us is no experiment; his face or expression toward us is anything but still. We are not alone in knowing the face of Jesus which bring us alive because he has given us his Holy Spirit to make known to us all that he has wanted to reveal to us. We do not wait for that Spirit until Pentecost, we have the Spirit on this Holy Thursday and in these Sacred Three Days making real the one we look on and the one who looks on us.

Let us return to that first image, that first action, which ushers in and gives us the meaning of these days and put ourselves there. A huddle of humanity: each of us leaning over Jesus our master, Jesus crouched and bowed below us, washing our feet, serving us, his face reflected in the water of the basin, his face joyful yet dreading, fearing but loving, wanting to turn in on

himself yet turning towards us in mercy, trusting yet sad, wanting to renege yet choosing to endure, his face not still and expressionless, but alive with all that makes us alive in him and in his Father through the indwelling gift of the Spirit. Let us let Jesus look upon us this night.