

The Faithzone : JESUS IN THE UK

This PDF version contains all the material relating to this section of the Video formatted for easy printing and comprising:

- Summary
- Transcript
- All questions/activities listed together
- Each question/activity listed on a separate page with pointers for discussion
- A collective worship

Summary

Presenter: Christopher Frayling, Rector, Royal College of Art

Images of Jesus: the history of the British peoples.

Jesus as a Roman god and Celtic warrior king.

The ruler of the medieval world.

Changing styles: a suffering Jesus.

The Reformation: shattering the image.

Jesus as cosmic Creator.

Jesus and Victorian responses to social and intellectual change.

Today: Jesus and the mass media.

'Ecce Homo' – Jesus as God made man.

Discussion

In what ways could Jesus be pictured effectively at the beginning of the 21st century?

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Transcript

[Headings]

Vivid, powerful images, yet no-one knows what the Jesus of history really looked like.

These portraits aren't, for the most part, supposed to be accurate portrayals. Instead they tell a very British story. The story of a figure who reflects the hopes, ideals and terrors of British people over the last two millennia.

This is the earliest image of Jesus to be found in Britain. Third century Christians pictured him like a Roman god.

Later, Celtic Christians adapted their traditional patterns and decorations. This eighth century cross from Rothwell, in Scotland, shows Jesus like a Celtic warrior king, trampling death and sin underfoot.

In the early Middle ages, Christianity's power had spread across Europe. Jesus's life on earth came to be seen as the very turning point of history. This medieval map shows him as the ruler of a world in which the holy city of Jerusalem, the focus of his ministry, lies right at the centre.

So when the Holy Land and Jerusalem were conquered by Muslims in the eleventh century, soldiers from all over Europe rallied to save it. The Crusaders, going into battle, pictured Jesus as their military commander.

It was the same powerful Jesus who looked down at people at prayer. For hundreds of years the paintings, carvings and windows in churches and cathedrals were illustrated scriptures – a book which even the illiterate could read. Here Jesus was often shown presiding over the last judgment at the end of time.

Even in early representations of the crucifixion, Jesus is triumphant: eyes wide open, victorious over death.

But by the fourteenth century, it was a very different story. Plague devastated Britain and the crucified Jesus came to reflect the suffering of ordinary people. Jesus appears as a very human figure, in terrible pain, totally identified with the human experience of death.

These empty niches in Ely Cathedral tell the story of a radical upheaval in the history of Jesus in British art. As the Protestant reformation spread across Britain in the sixteenth century, vast amounts of medieval art and decoration were destroyed. The reformers, and later Cromwell and the Puritans, regarded images of saints, prophets and even of Jesus himself as idols, threatening to take God's place. Ornament was a crime. Public images of Jesus disappeared for nearly 200 years.

When they re-emerged, scientific progress in the eighteenth century had transformed the British view of the world, and God. He is a cosmic creator of a universe governed by rational laws. To study the natural world is to see God himself. This Jesus has shed

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the mystery and majesty of earlier images; he is a rational and moral teacher and healer.

In the Victorian era, people struggled to find ways to reconcile their ideas of Jesus with a period of huge social and intellectual upheaval. For the burgeoning middle classes, the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild', sitting with them as one of the family, confirmed their new-found values.

Other artists put the mystery of Jesus firmly in the world of fact and science, as real as the factory or the steam engine. In Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* every detail is accurate to first century Palestine – the lantern, the plants, the clothes, even the door hinges.

The twentieth century saw the rise of the mass media and, with it, an explosion of images of Jesus to suit all needs and agendas. He was portrayed as a victim of world conflict, a villager in Berkshire, a freedom fighter – even a film star. Multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-media.

Jesus surveys London. In Mark Wallinger's statue *Ecce Homo*, Jesus is now one amongst us, God made man.

Over the centuries he has been called King, Crusader and Saviour. How will we picture him in the next thousand years?

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Activities

1. Images of Jesus often reflect the hopes and fears of the society in which they were created. What do a selection of images say about Jesus? What hopes, fears – or other emotions and attitudes – are reflected in them?
2. Mark Wallinger's statue in Trafalgar Square was very popular with the public. Why? Another image, displayed in Shrewsbury Abbey in 2001 was lambasted by the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. Why?
3. If photography had been invented two thousand years ago, would the church find it easier or harder to preach the Gospel?
4. During the Reformation many windows, statues and other images were broken. Why? What is your reaction to this sort of iconoclasm?
5. How will we picture Jesus in the next 200 (500? 1000?) years?

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Activity 1

Images of Jesus often reflect the hopes and fears of the society in which they were created. What do a selection of images say about Jesus? What hopes, fears – or other emotions and attitudes – are reflected in them?

These images are:

Christ Crowned with Thorns by Hieronymous Bosch

Christ by W. Sallmann (1940)

Page from the *Westminster Psalter* (c.1200)

Lamb of God by Francisco de Zurbaran (c.1635).

- Teachers could make their own selection from different historical periods and from different cultures. The images could be distributed individually and groups report back to the whole class their thoughts and feelings about their example. Alternatively, each person could analyse a series of pictures. A voluminous selection of Western Art from between 1200 and 1800, including many appropriate images, can be found at the web Gallery of Art at <http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/welcome.html> Other images can be found via the links on Dr Mark Goodacre's site, New Testament Gateway, at <http://www.ntgateway.com/images.htm>
- This topic inevitably invites creative responses to the issues discussed. These could involve, initially, copying images in various styles, to develop a feeling for the different approaches and to develop a repertoire of techniques. Students could then create their own images, in a variety of media, remembering that each will have a theological significance – will give an insight into the artist's understanding about the nature of God.
- Another approach would be to focus on the cultural context of the images. The second half of the 20th century saw a reaction against the flaxen-haired Christ that predominated from the Victorians onwards. Could the students create images of Christ that reflect and speak to societies other than our own? (see also the 'Cross' activity suggested in the 'Mission' section.)

Extension

It is important to remember that the historical images do not just reflect the emotions of the society that produced them; they are also struggling with – and full of – theological ideas. For example, Christians believe that Jesus was Emmanuel ('God with us'), but what are the implications of this perception? Did it mean that God could suffer pain too? Images of Christ on the cross which show a triumphant or unperturbed Jesus are, possibly, trying to answer this question. Another interpretation is that they are looking through the moment of pain to the ultimate reality of the Risen Christ. Another interpretation would be....?

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Activity 2

Mark Wallinger's statue in Trafalgar Square was very popular with the public. Why? Another image, displayed in Shrewsbury Abbey in 2001 was lambasted by the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. Why?

In Ecce Homo, Mark Wallinger's simple, life-size Eveyman Christ subtly undercut the pomposity of many of the statues around it in Trafalgar Square.

The statue in Shrewsbury Abbey, *Naked Christ* by Michele Coxon, is made from sheep bones, rusting metal, tissue paper and resin. This is how she described the genesis and meaning of her work:

'The materials I have used are all found on my walks along the River Vyrnwy and around the fields of Meifod, Wales, where I live. The wood is worn, softened and shaped by the water. Metal is left abandoned by farmers to turn the colour of autumn rust. The bones of dead sheep are picked clean by crows and wild foxes and scavenged by the wind. To pass a carcass day after day, watching it slowly decay, and return to the soil, has influenced my art. When I started the naked Christ I did intend to have a cross, but over the weeks I could not find the right piece of wood. By then I realized that I did not need a physical cross. I wanted the image of a man who has suffered and whose earthly body is decaying, like the animals on my walks. The soul has flown, but only just.'

The Daily Mail (3rd August 2001), under the heading, 'The Image of Christ That's Deemed Too Disturbing', quoted a 34 year-old woman as saying:

'I'm glad I didn't bring my children along. The statue is obscene. It is very gory. It made me wince when I first laid eyes on it. I find it disturbing that a church would choose to display this so-called work of art.'

A 19 year-old boy found the sculpture '*extremely morbid and gruesome.*'

What do pupils think? Late Medieval Christians wouldn't have batted an eyelid – see the Grunewald Crucifixion in the 'Healing' section. Are modern audiences really unable to face a grim crucifixion? If so, why? Is it very different from the violence in modern war films? Are they unaware of the theology of Christianity, with death and resurrection at its heart? Or are such images, as some have argued, expressions of sadism and cruelty worship?

Extension

How often have other modern artists depicted the Crucifixion, as opposed to the other events in Jesus life? Clues could come from a search on art gallery websites, using key words in Jesus life such as Nativity, Entry to Jerusalem, Resurrection... Which is the most frequently depicted in the 20th century? Why might this be?

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Activity 3

If photography had been invented two thousand years ago, would the church find it easier or harder to preach the Gospel?

If there had been a video camera there when the stone rolled from the entrance to Jesus's tomb, would people find it any easier to believe in the resurrection? Or would there always be reasons for disbelief? Christian theologians emphasize that belief is as much to do with an inner experience (the Holy Spirit) as it is to do with external evidence.

- Cinema is thought of as *the* 20th century art form. But has film shown itself able to cope with the Jesus story? Why are so many religious films frankly so bad and so deserving of parody? Is it down to the Hollywood lowest-common-denominator factor? Or is there something in the form itself that doesn't work with religious narrative and this sort of inner experience?
- There are several sites devoted to Christianity and the cinema. A good start can be made at the *Jesus: Real to Reel* site at <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/realreel.htm#Online>
Dr Mark Goodacre's site (homepage: <http://www.ntgateway.com/>) also has a page devoted to Jesus and film.

Extension

Discuss the students' experience of Christianity on film. If possible, find some examples to show the students – Mark Goodacre's site has details of which films are available (and is linked to Amazon!). *Monty Python's Life of Brian* – a good one to round off any discussion of Jesus and Hollywood – is available on both video and DVD.

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Activity 4

During the Reformation many windows, statues and other images were broken. Why? What is your reaction to this sort of iconoclasm?

Oliver Cromwell and the 'Puritans' come in for knee-jerk condemnation by art lovers. The destruction of the stone Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban might, perhaps, be taken as a modern example of theology and art coming into collision.

- Islam and Judaism discourage images of God – and it was scriptural prohibitions that lay behind the destruction of images, such as those of God the Father, in stained glass. Statues of saints were destroyed because devotion to them was thought to be at the expense of devotion to Jesus Christ. Beautiful objects such as Rood Screens were dismantled because they embodied the division of the church into two castes – priests and laity. Glass, stone and wood may be beautiful, but for 16th century workmen they were symbols of oppression and wrongness – and for them true worship was more important than beautiful worship. What do the students think? Can Truth and Beauty be in conflict? (despite what Keats said, '*Beauty is Truth; Truth, Beauty*')
- Theological issues from the 16th century may be difficult to grasp, but certain images are charged with negative meaning in our own society and are therefore repressed. In the Netherlands, a generally liberal society, blacked-faced white people are still an integral part of the Christmas celebrations, welcoming St Nicholas (the 'Black Peters' are thought to be the ones who actually deliver gifts to the houses). In Britain, such caricatures would be thought deeply offensive and racist. In the Netherlands, too, 'golliwog' dolls are much more easily available (as is *Tintin in Africa* with its caricature black people – England is one of the few European countries that doesn't have a translation of this particular title). In Britain, a well-known jam label famously abandoned its golliwog emblem because of pressure to ditch such offensive images. Such examples are not an exact parallel with earlier theological disputes, but they do help bring home the point that images can be charged with offensive meaning by our own age. What other contemporary examples can students think of?

Extension

On occasion art and religion still come into open conflict. As in the case of Michele Coxon's *Naked Christ*, a religious image can offend a secular society, but the opposition can come from the other direction too. Blasphemy is still a crime in Britain.

It is in America, though, that one of the more interesting recent examples occurred. Andres Serrano's work *Piss Christ* – a photograph of a crucifix suspended in a phial of urine – caused great controversy when it was exhibited. Politicians called for funding to be withdrawn from the gallery in North Carolina that displayed it. In Australia, pressure from the Roman Catholic Church forced the National Gallery of Victoria to close an exhibition which included it.

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Activity 4 (continued)

What do the students think of this image? Is it beautiful – or offensive? What do they think the artist is trying to say? Even if it is taken to be a thoughtful and beautiful image, should it still be banned if it offends a large number of people's deeply held beliefs and their sense of identity?

Much more information about this image, its 'meaning' and the issues of free speech, can be found by feeding 'Piss Christ' or Andres Serrano into a search engine. One site including work by Serrano, that may provoke discussion among older students on the collision of modern art and Christianity, can be found on the *Sacred and Profane* website at <http://www.sacredandprofane.org.uk/home.html>

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Activity 5

How will we picture Jesus in the next 200 (500? 1000?) years?

Who knows?! Either students' answers will reflect a Jesus set in a timewarp, or a Jesus who is an example of how see people being in the society of the future.

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Collective Worship - YOU IN THE UK

Four students move forward to begin the collective worship.

SPEAKER 1: This morning we are going to see a short video.

SPEAKER 2: Then we will ask some questions about it afterwards to find what you think about what's said in the video.

Show the video which lasts about 4 minutes, then play the music as the four students begin addressing the students.

The speakers move forward to continue...

SPEAKER 3 (*quoting from the video*): “The twentieth century saw the rise of the mass media and, with it, an explosion of images of Jesus to suit all needs and agendas. He was portrayed as a victim of world conflict, a villager in Berkshire, a freedom fighter – even a film star.... How will we picture him in the next thousand years?”

SPEAKER 4: Do you have an image of Jesus in your mind? Some idea about what he might've looked like? Everybody has probably got a slightly different image of him and the video is telling us that's because we have been presented with many different images over the centuries. So what does this tell us?

SPEAKER 1: It tells us that Jesus might've had the same publicity agent as Kylie Mynogue or Madonna or Robbie Williams.

SPEAKER 4: (*somewhat amazed at this answer*) Why?

SPEAKER 1: They've all successfully changed their image a number of times but still remained popular. So if you want to get famous and stay famous - get a good publicist.

SPEAKER 2: I don't think that's exactly what the video is saying but it's true that if you want to influence people you have to have the right image... and Jesus did want to influence people to lead better lives.

SPEAKER 3: True. He wanted people to follow him and learn to love one another or at least treat one another with respect. But do you really think that Jesus was that much interested in his 'image'?

SPEAKER 1: Maybe not.

SPEAKER 4: But the artists who made all the different pictures of him must have been. Every time a painter or sculptor starts an image of Jesus he or she must decide what they want to say about him because that's going to affect how they present him.

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SPEAKER 1: Exactly the same as the publicists for Kylie Mynogue – they have to decide how they want us to think of her. They wouldn't want a photo of her in the newspapers, just seconds after getting out of bed in the morning – before she's had time to put her make up on.

SPEAKER 2: She wouldn't want to be seen like that. It would ruin her image and everybody has an 'image' whether they like it or not.

SPEAKER 3: I don't worry about my image.

SPEAKER 4: Yes you do. The way you get your hair cut. The shoes you choose to wear – that's all image-making. Did you do your homework last night?

SPEAKER 3: Yes.

SPEAKER 4: Maybe you did it – partly – so that you aren't seen as a lazy good-for-nothing slacker. We all try to project an image of ourselves as being the sort of person we want to be.

The speakers turn their attention directly towards the gathered students.

SPEAKER 1: Let's think about YOUR image. We're going to ask you some questions and you can have a think about them.

SPEAKER 2: Close your eyes if it helps you to concentrate.

SPEAKER 3: Some people would say about Jesus that he was a rebel who got into so much trouble with the authorities that they ended up executing him. But Jesus might not want to be seen as a rebel. Maybe he would prefer to be seen as a reformer who was offering a better way to organise society. Or someone who was showing people something about God they didn't already know. Do you want to be thought of as being heroic?

SPEAKER 4: Do you want to be seen as cute? Or a funny joker?

SPEAKER 1: Would you like to be thought of as mysterious?

SPEAKER 2: Do you want to be seen as meek and mild?

SPEAKER 3: Do you want people to think of you as a media star? Somebody who is really going places?

SPEAKER 4: Maybe you can see some advantage if people see you as some sort of sad victim who needs to be taken care of? Have you ever tried to get away with that image?

SPEAKER 1: Would you prefer to be seen as a clever and rational person with a strong intellect? Do you want people to admire you? Nothing wrong with that, but how do you organise the image that tells people that's what you really are like?

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SPEAKER 2: Do you want people to respect you? How are you going to manage that image?

SPEAKER 3: Do you think you're life will be easier if people are frightened of you? How long do you think you can keep that image up before they realise you're just a cowardly idiot?

SPEAKER 4: Do you want people to avoid you? That's easy to achieve by giving off the image of being selfish. Check it out if you really want to be a loner all your life.

SPEAKER 1: Or would you like to be seen as a real friend who can be relied on in times of trouble? That image will take effort to achieve but you'll get there eventually if you persist.

SPEAKER 2: Are you ready to put some work into making yourself into the person you want to be?

SPEAKER 3: It's easy to do – first decide what sort of person you want to be and then start creating the image to go with it – let people know who you really are and what you really stand for. But you've got to start living it for real too.

SPEAKER 4: Jesus did that and it brought him a heap of trouble. But, because of what he believed in, he got to be one of the most famous people in the history of the world. You don't have to aim that high but you might like to start by deciding what you really...

SPEAKER 1: really

SPEAKER 2: really

SPEAKER 3: really

ALL SPEAKERS: ... believe in.

Think about it.