

**“Who do you say that I am?” a sermon based on Matthew 16:13-20 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 23 August 2020 by Kerry Enright.**

Jesus asks - who do you say that I am? That is a central ongoing question for followers of Jesus. It is a question that even when we answer it once, never goes away. It is not as if when we turn to Christ, we find an answer that will do for the rest of our lives. It is not as if we will ever come up with a water-tight, complete, detailed formula with an exclamation mark at the end. Nor is it enough to simply restate the Apostles' Creed, as good as that is. As circumstances change, the question gets asked again. So in coming to faith, we answer. In taking up a job, we answer. In entering into a relationship, we answer. As we face death, we answer. Our answers evolve as we age. And it is not just a personal question. It is for every congregation through all its experiences. A crucial, central, pivotal question - Who do we say Jesus is.

I want today to take a tangent with this question. It is a lively topic at present because of the Black Lives Matter movement. People are looking at statues and institutions and who they point to and how they continue to influence us. One strand has been exploring the concept of a white Jesus. The topic is broad, so I take a small sliver, some artistic representations.

I have visited hundreds of churches and church halls in New Zealand and Australia. There is one depiction of Jesus more common than any other. This one ... blue eyes, light hair, light skin. Painted by Warner Sallman in 1940. Sallman created art for advertising campaigns and successfully marketed this picture worldwide by partnering two publishing companies, one Protestant, one Catholic. It is called the head of Christ and it came to be included on everything from prayer cards to stained glass windows, from calendars to hymnals. Sallman's painting continues a long tradition

of white Europeans creating and disseminating pictures of Christ made in their own image.

A Melbourne theologian Robyn Whitaker has written about the significance of how we portray Jesus. She points out the problem of Sallman's painting - Jesus was not white. While there is no physical description of Jesus in the Bible, there is also no doubt that the historical Jesus, the man who was executed by the Roman State in the first century CE, was a brown-skinned, Middle Eastern Jew. Now to be sure, he could be olive skinned but it is extremely unlikely he looked anything like Sallman's portrayal. Now Jesus may not have looked anything like this, but this is likely to be more realistic.

Does this matter? It matters when we marry the art to racism. It seems that over time and in various ways, the representing of Jesus as a white European has influenced how people have treated other people who are not white. Some commentators have shown the correlation between such portrayals and white supremacy movements. And not just racism - antisemitism. Some artists sought to distance Jesus and his parents from their Jewishness. Even small details such as having no pierced ears because earrings were associated with Jewish women. The Archbishop of Canterbury recently called for people to reflect on how the images of Jesus have influenced our faith.

As a society, we have become aware of the power of representation and the importance of diverse role models. Whitaker gives an example. Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her role in 12 Years a Slave. In interviews since then, Nyong'o has repeatedly talked about her feelings of inferiority as a young woman because all the images of beauty she saw around her were of lighter-skinned women. It was only when she saw the fashion world embracing Sudanese model Alek Wek that she realised black could be beautiful too.

If we can recognise the importance of ethnically and physically diverse role models in our media, can we do the same for faith? Can we be thoughtful about what happens when images of a whitened Jesus dominate? Many churches and cultures do depict Jesus as a brown or black man. Orthodox Christians usually have a very different iconography to that of European art – if you enter a church in Africa, you'll likely see an African Jesus on display. But when we see a limited range of images of Jesus, says Whitaker, we allow the mainstream Christian community to separate their devotion to Jesus from compassionate regard for those who look different. Indeed, she suggests, it creates a cognitive disconnect, where we can feel deep affection for Jesus but little empathy for a Middle Eastern person. It likewise has implications for the theological claim that humans are made in God's image. If God is always imaged as white, then the default human becomes white. Such thinking undergirds racism.

What difference would it make if we just remembered that Jesus was brown? If we were confronted with the reality that the body hung on the cross was a brown body: one broken, tortured, and publicly executed by an oppressive regime. How might it change our attitudes if we could see that the unjust imprisonment, abuse, and execution of the historical Jesus has more in common with the experience of indigenous peoples or asylum seekers than it does with those who hold power in the church and usually represent Christ? Perhaps most radical of all, says Whitaker, what might change if we were more mindful that the person Christians celebrate as God in the flesh and saviour of the entire world was not a white man, but a Middle Eastern Jew.

In New Zealand there has been a strand of art that portrays Jesus as Maori. There is the James K Baxter poem, the Maori Jesus. "I saw the Maori Jesus Walking on Wellington Harbour. He wore blue dungarees, His beard and hair were long. His breath smelled of mussels and paraoa. When he smiled it looked like the dawn. When

he broke wind the little fishes trembled. When he frowned the ground shook. When he laughed everybody got drunk. The Maori Jesus came on shore And picked out his twelve disciples. One cleaned toilets in the railway station ...” And so the poem continues ...

Anglican and Catholic churches especially have represented Jesus as Maori - St Faith's Ohinemutu Rotorua; The Catholic church at Hiruharama on the Whanganui River; And then of course, we have the way Jesus is portrayed in the stained glass windows at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand. Who do you say Jesus is?

<https://theconversation.com/jesus-wasnt-white-he-was-a-brown-skinned-middle-eastern-jew-heres-why-that-matters-91230>

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

***Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,  
made known in Jesus, given in grace***



**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)