



17 May 2015  
The Sunday after Ascension Day  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 53 vv. 1–12  
Hebrews 1 vv. 1–12

## Images of Christ Christ: Grotesque or beautiful?

By The Rev'd Dr Alison Milbank  
Associate Professor of Literature and Theology, Nottingham University

What did Jesus actually look like? We have no idea because the question did not interest the writers of the gospels. They were more concerned to show the effect of his presence on those who met him. The fact that artistic representations do look somewhat alike is due to the Mandyllion, an image supposedly imprinted on a cloth by Christ's face, and sent to heal King Abgar of Edessa. So eastern icons and western art alike tend to show a man with reddish brown hair, a long nose, and a parted beard and the two images from the great altarpiece by Grünewald I have chosen to talk about this evening, continue this tradition.

Later Christian theologians did discuss, however, whether Christ was beautiful. For he is, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, 'the brightness of [the Father's] glory, and the express image of his person'. God is the source of beauty and his Son and Image must convey this beauty, not only in his divine nature, but spilling over into his human soul and body, though it may require the eyes of faith to discern the divine radiance.

It may seem particularly hard to see the beauty in the detail from the central crucifixion scene from the Isenheim altarpiece. Christ's flesh is livid, almost putrid, pockmarked with sores and tiny wounds, some with thorns extruding. Thorns forming the crown actually form a kind of arid spikey hair. His mouth is slack and open, and the musculature is horribly tense. This is an extreme representation of the suffering servant of whom Isaiah speaks, who has 'no beauty that we should desire him'. Christ here bears the bruises and stripes, and his veiled eyes lock him into a cycle of pain rather than as in earlier crucifixions looking out to Mary and John beneath the cross. Truly he is alienated – 'despised and rejected of men' – and it is hard to look at him and not want to hide your face.

The same Christian writers who delighted to hymn the beauty of Christ, such as Augustine, stressed equally the *Christus deformis*, the deformed and un-beautiful Christ of the passion. Grünewald's is one of the most extreme examples of the *Christus deformis* because his Christ is truly de-formed and grotesque: his feet in the full picture are out of shape, and his hands reach out like metallic claws in agony. I use the word 'grotesque' because it means more than just ugly. A grotesque or deformed body reveals in its monstrosity the fact that it is de-formed: it horrifies us because it is not as it should be. Here the innocent Christ suffers unjustly; he bears the sins of the world on his body. The excessive deformation shows the overwhelming nature of his love for humanity and his self-giving. His moral beauty shines out all the more clearly through the sores.

Another reason for this grotesque Christ lies in the fact that the altarpiece was made for St Antony's Monastery in Isenheim, where they cared for plague-sufferers, and those suffering from ergotism, a then mortal skin disease. We know that on arrival patients would be taken to the chapel, and would have seen in this figure not so much an object of pity as someone suffering in solidarity with themselves, whose wounds really might heal them.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Alison Milbank



17 May 2015  
The Sunday after Ascension Day  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 53 vv. 1–12  
Hebrews 1 vv. 1–12

Moreover, the front panel divides down the side of Christ's body, so that it opens, and the break imitates his pierced body as well as the Eucharistic bread broken at the altar beneath for all to share. The next layer reveals the annunciation, a mystic nativity, and on the viewer's right the second image on your sheet showing the risen Christ. This is the Christ of the Hebrews reading, full of divine radiance, 'upholding all things by the word of his power'. So his arms are raised to encircle the sun behind him as if he holds the whole world in his hands. He rises up like a fireball from the tomb beneath in an image that combines resurrection, ascension and also transfiguration, when his friends earlier had a glimpse of this divine glory in his face. His shroud comes with him but has been turned from white to fiery orange and red. The raised arms uphold but also demonstrate that this is the same Christ as the crucifixion, for they bear the marks of the iron nails. The head is one with the burning circle beyond it, for the risen Christ is radiant, himself a burning sun of light, showing what Thomas Aquinas called *claritas*, which is the radiance that any object we encounter offers, whereby we are called through it to its source in God. For beauty calls all things to itself, as this image does, whirling out of the tomb beneath and drawing the eye inexorably upwards. It is stable and dynamic at the same time. Imagine again those plague-ridden patients before this triumphant image. They see their liberation too, when the sores will be healed, but their pain not forgotten but taken up into a greater glory. They too will rise again, in a body equally light and 'adorned with wounds' like trophies.

This is the 'airy Christ' of the poet Stevie Smith:  
Who is this that comes in splendour, coming from the blazing East?  
This is he we had not thought of, this is he the airy Christ.

Wonderful as the image is, it is also rather strange. The flesh is almost uncanny in its whiteness; the face emerging and receding into the light actually glows as if transparent. By contrast the knees are decidedly knobbly and physical, and the pose – the relation of arms and slanted legs – almost grotesque. Not only airy, this is also 'he we had not thought of'. Perhaps there is something excessive about true beauty: it is not tidy and correct but strange, evoking in us that hunger for mystery – for ultimate beauty – which I believe we all share. Grünewald seems to be signalling to us the limits of what can be conveyed by a visual image. The knobbly knees do not detract but signal the mysterious nature of resurrection.

We need both the beautiful and the grotesque Christ, for he shows us the beauty hidden in deformity, and the limits of our own attempt to dive into the truth about God. Both images call us for we too are beautiful and deformed. We bear our secret scars and our ugly, death-loving sins. And yet we are made in God's image and called to be radiant icons, bearing his beauty. For to have a longing for beauty is to become beautiful. Augustine wrote that it is Christ's deformity that makes us beautiful. We could not see and deal with our own sinfulness, so Christ shows it to us on the cross, not to condemn us but to show us sin and its redemption at once. We discern in this grotesque figure his hidden beauty, which is ours too. And indeed, there is something beautiful even in that pain-wracked body. Try turning the image sideways so the face is upright and at once you are aware of his presence. His hiddenness draws us in.

It was Ascension Day this Thursday, and the choir went up the tower to announce to sleepy Cambridge that heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, God and humanity have united. Our tidy world of opposed categories is blown apart by Christ taking our human flesh into the godhead. One day, God will wrap up this world like a garment and we too shall rise and see directly the full beauty of Christ, and we too shall be drenched in the divine radiance.