

Reading Josephus (Isaiah 52.13 – 53.5)

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Reading Josephus¹

Once, reading Josephus,
I found this description of Christ: he was a black man,
very nearly black,
tarred with the Palestinian sun
and shorter than most.
His hair was never cut. His nose beaked over,
farcically Jewish.

Hunchbacked
as well, a haversack
of gristle and meat
lugged about, pressing his spine down,
tilting his eyes to the sand. Imagine that. Those
hefty wooden verbs
dragged out and thrown
before the listeners –
not sublime at all, not the easy construction of a man
nailed upright.

This was a lame Saviour
glazed with sweat, heart pounding from the body's haul
up to Calvary,
where his tall disciples
and the squat metal guards
had to bend back their necks to see him
hammered out straight at last. Ascending,
with all the pretty angels.

John Foulcher

¹ John Foulcher, *What On Earth Possessed You* (Canberra: Halstead Press, 2008), p.23.

‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us’. These lines from the Prologue to John’s gospel encapsulate the heart of Christian proclamation. In Jesus, God is said to be wholly expressed in human form; God bodily among us. As Jesus himself put it, ‘Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father’ (John 14.9). And yet nowhere in the New Testament is there a description of Jesus’ physical appearance. It’s true that in the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus’ face is said to shine like the sun and his clothes to be dazzling white. But this imagery refers to one extraordinary and transfiguring encounter. It doesn’t tell us about Jesus’ ordinary bodily appearance: the colour of his hair, his height, ethnicity or demeanour. The field is left wide open for the exercise of human imagination!

There seem to be three main ways of responding to this gap in the biblical witness. The first, perhaps most obvious, is to assume there’s no depiction of Jesus’ physical form because that’s not what really matters about him, or indeed about any of us. This is a response with long biblical pedigree. For example, centuries before Jesus’ birth, when the prophet Samuel was directed by God to choose a king for Israel from among the sons of Jesse, Samuel had been immediately smitten by the handsome appearance of the eldest, thinking that surely *he* was the Lord’s anointed. ‘But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look upon his appearance or on the height of his stature ... for the Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’ (1 Samuel 16.7). Though it must be said that David, the Lord’s eventual choice for king, did just happen to have ‘beautiful eyes’, and to be ‘handsome’ and ‘ruddy’, according to the text (1 Samuel 16.12)!

Jesus himself taught his followers not to look on outward appearance – whether of status, virtue or physicality. Condemning the Pharisees for their obsession with the appearance of righteousness, for example, Jesus accused them of being ‘like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth’. So, he goes on, ‘you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness’ (Matthew 23.27-28). In the healing stories, Jesus is consistently depicted

as looking past the illness, the deformity, the insanity of those who seek his help to behold their essential wholeness and loveability. So he, like God, penetrates outward appearance to discern the state of the heart. For the same reason, it doesn't matter what kind of body or what appearance, Jesus himself had. To 'see God' in his human form is simply to see, shining through his face, words and gestures, the steadfast love and compassion of God. At one level, this seems just as it should be.

And yet, having said this, it must also be acknowledged that such an account risks denying how profoundly our physical appearance and bodily capacities affect our experience of the world and shape our humanity. For all that Christianity speaks of the significance of Incarnation, in practice it's often fostered a disembodied spirituality, and thus distorted our relationship to our own bodies as well as the body of the created order. Gender and sexuality, illness and health, injury and disability, mortality and ageing, physical beauty or the lack of it, deftness and sensitivity: all these bodily realities have a huge impact on our sense of self and on how others relate to us. Our souls are thus necessarily shaped by the particularity of our bodies and what befalls them, and theologically our faith tradition agrees.

It testifies that it's the whole of our embodied life that's the object of God's transforming love. In the Christian vision, there is no detachable soul, ejected from or rescued at death from some supposedly contingent, merely 'external' casing. We proclaim not the immortality of the soul but the resurrection of the body and the transformation of the whole material world. And if this is what our journey of faith involves, then it seems not just idle curiosity or pointless speculation to wonder what kind of body God took, when God in Jesus dwelt among us.

And this brings us to a second way of dealing with the lack of information in the New Testament about Jesus' appearance. Writing in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, theologians Jerome and Augustine argued that Jesus must have been ideally beautiful in face and body, and in the 13th century Thomas Aquinas built on this tradition, reasoning 'that Jesus must have embodied every possible human

perfection'.² You can see their theological point. If Jesus is a manifestation of God and thus of wholeness, completion and creation's fulfilment in the midst of our broken world, then of course he must be perfect. Even for us, some have said that the more transparent we are to God the more beautiful we become. The 14th century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, thought that when you meditate, you grow more attractive! So there's a theological logic here, although sociologically, this vision of Christ's perfection has all too often been refracted through a racist or ethnocentric lens. In European Christianity, for example, Jesus has regularly been depicted as blond, blue-eyed and Aryan, since it's just too confronting to conceive him as being simultaneously perfect and of 'Middle Eastern appearance'.

But there is a third way of imagining Jesus' physicality. It involves a profound reversal of this mainstream logic, though interestingly it's the earliest strand in the tradition. To some extent it emerged in non-Christian or hostile sources, and thus may seem a form of anti-Christian propaganda. The 2nd century philosopher Celsus, for example, wrote that Jesus was 'ugly and small', and some early writers claim that Jewish historian Josephus described Jesus as being 'long-faced and crooked' or humpbacked. But even 2nd century Christian writers, including Tertullian and Irenaeus, proposed that Jesus' outward form was despicable, that he had an ignoble appearance, that he was small, weak, ugly and bent. John Foulcher's extraordinary poem, 'Reading Josephus', elaborates this strand of the tradition in what I think is a deeply moving and powerful way. 'Once, reading Josephus, I found this description of Christ: he was a black man, very nearly black, tarred with the Palestinian sun and shorter than most. His hair was never cut. His nose beaked over, farcically Jewish'.

At least for the Christian apologists, this way of imagining Jesus was connected with the fulfilment of messianic prophecy. As we heard in our Scripture reading, Isaiah had prophesied that the one to redeem Israel would have 'no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him' (Isaiah 53.2). From the very beginning, the gospels had connected the event of

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_and_appearance_of_Jesus

Jesus' crucifixion with this passage. Isaiah's notion of the so-called 'suffering servant' gave them a way of interpreting Jesus' rejection, humiliation and inglorious death as his willing and necessary suffering of humanity's violent alienation. 'Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted' (Isaiah 53.4). In other words, we thought God was punishing him; when really, all along, he was freeing us through his absorption of our dis-ease. And if this is a way of interpreting the event of the crucifixion, it's a shortish step – theologically – to conceive of the entirety of Jesus' bodily life as sharing the suffering, finitude and enclosure of the human condition, so as to break open the whole of us to God.

And it's this sense of the sheer lumpish, density of bodily life closed in on itself that John Foulcher evokes so brilliantly with his image of a humpbacked Jesus: 'a haversack of gristle and meat lugged about, pressing his spine down, tilting his eyes to the sand. Imagine that'. This is a vision that symbolises the gravity and stubborn materiality of all our lives. Listen again to the sense of brute fleshiness, the sheer recalcitrance of existence, 'a haversack of gristle and meat, lugged about'. Of course, our 'haversacks', that which weighs us down and tilts our eyes to the sand, may differ. In the poem, Jesus bears the burden of a hunched back – but it could be limbs twisted by rheumatoid arthritis or the persistent heaviness of chronic depression or endometriosis; it could be the disability that makes everyday life a struggle or the slow creeping of illness and age.

Our embodiment is a wondrous gift. It constitutes and enables our life in the world. And, for almost all of us, to some degree or another, at some point or another, it's a struggle: our bodies 'glazed with sweat' as we make our way through life, hearts 'pounding from the body's haul up to Calvary'. This is our mortal frame which a humpbacked Jesus shares, 'not sublime at all, not the easy construction of a man nailed upright', but a 'lame Saviour', fully, absurdly, tragically one of us. And to me, this profound evocation of physicality of embodied life reminds us also of the absurd risk of human particularity – the fact that each of us is born in the

circumstances of a particular time and place, in this body and not that, with this genetic code and not that, as this race or sexual orientation or gender identity and not that. All this is risked and entered into by the Word who became flesh and lived among us. All this is broken open to God through him.

But what does this mean exactly? Isaiah proclaimed that 'by his bruises', by his suffering, his undergoing our violence and sharing our condition, 'we are healed'. I don't think this means that in our deepening communion with God our suffering, woundedness and finitude is simply erased or 'fixed', as if it has never been. Remember the risen Jesus has the scars of the crucifixion, the marks of his death, in his hands and his side; what befalls us and who we become through our embodied life will still somehow be part of us in whatever form of life we find in God. In the poem, the Jesus 'hammered out straight at last' is still a 'lame Saviour', and it's precisely because of this that, 'lifted up' (John 12.32), he constitutes the bridge between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity.

If this is true, then whatever 'heaven' means, it isn't an escape from the fullness of the life we've lived but the breaking open of the whole of us to the transmission of grace. The crucified and ascended Jesus is still one with us. And who knows, perhaps he's even ugly, small, hook-nosed and hunchbacked, seated at the right hand of the Father amid all the pretty angels.