*these things, are the son of God. I have therefore written to you to ask you if you would take the trouble to come to me and heal all the ill which I suffer. For I have heard that the Jews are murmuring against you and are plotting to injure you. But I have a very small yet noble city which is great enough for us both.*

Abgar convinced Ananias (possibly the same Ananias who helped the apostle Paul) to deliver the letter and to take an accurate account of Jesus: his appearance, stature, hair, eyes, and his words. Ananias delivered the letter, then stared at Jesus, trying to fix in his mind the face of Christ. Try though he did, Ananias could not memorize the face of Jesus. Knowing Ananias’ heart, Jesus asked a disciple for a towel. He wiped his face on the towel, then gave it to Ananias. On the towel was the very image of the face of Christ. A miracle!

“Take this towel to Abgar,” said Jesus, “and tell him I cannot come, for I must fulfill my destiny here, but later I will send my disciple, Thaddaeus, to heal him.” Ananias fell to the ground and worshiped Jesus, then returned to Abgar in Edessa, bearing the towel which miraculously healed Abgar of his disease long before Thaddaeus arrived. This towel is reputed to bear first and truest depiction of Jesus. The Mandylion Icon is alleged to be based on this towel-image, and as such, has become the prototype for the face of Jesus down through the centuries.

Scripture teaches that we are made in God’s image, but too often we distort that image, making Jesus into a reflection of ourselves, projecting values and our desires onto him. This causes us to misjudge his character and misunderstand his intentions, as his disciples did. When Jesus was with his disciples, teaching, laughing, drinking wine, and eating bread, visible, touchable, and knowable, they rarely saw or understood him for who he truly was.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, everyone present misunderstood who he was and what his true purpose was. But during the last week of his life, the world finally gained a true likeness of Jesus. They finally understood him and his intentions, but they decided they did not like what they saw, preferring to put Jesus away, permanently.

The adoring crowd expected a conquering king who could restore Israel’s greatness, throwing off the weight of Roman servitude. What they got was a humble, servant Savior. The religious authorities thought he was a dangerous, riot-rousing rebel who would lead the people away from God. Little did they know that by killing him, Jesus would become far more powerful, leading generations to the saving knowledge of God.

So, what *is* the character and true likeness of Jesus? During this Holy Week we see Jesus righteously outraged at the crass materialism of the temple. We witness Jesus overturning tables and turning the table-owning merchants against him. We watch Jesus challenge his disciples while he faces their betrayal. We see Jesus desiring not to fulfill his destiny, but knowing he must. We see Jesus demonstrating sacrificial love at the cross.

The true likeness of Jesus is his sense of right over wrong, his knowledge of good over evil, his compassion in the face of rejection, his obedience to the point of death, and his sacrificial love for those created in God’s image. The danger is that we, like the disciples, like the crowds of Jerusalem, and like the religious leaders might be among those who “did not understand these things, who did not see them clearly at first” (John 12:16).

What exactly did they not understand? They did not understand *humble service*. Jesus used a towel to wash the feet of the disciples (John 13), an act of humble service that astounded them. The disciples continually bickered about their pride of place in the coming kingdom. Even at the Last Supper the disciples argued about who among them was greatest. It is totally unbelievable that having just eaten the bread and shared the cup, a fight breaks out among the disciples (Luke 22:24). They did not get it.

They did not understand *sacrificial love*. Jesus told them, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Those who heard Jesus say this thought he was stark, raving mad (John 10:20). Jesus would later say to his disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

They did not understand his *redemptive mission*. He came “not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). They did not understand his *welcoming compassion*. While his heart broke for the multitudes, his disciples tried to send them away. “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). They did not understand *intercessory prayer*. They asked Jesus how to pray, and he taught them to ask their Heavenly Father for daily bread (Luke 11:2-4). They did not understand the *cost of discipleship,* so Jesus taught them the meaning of self-denial: “any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33).

On Palm Sunday, the disciples simply did not understand Jesus. On Maundy Thursday, they understood Jesus even less. On Good Friday, they gave up trying to understand and returned home to their previous lives and jobs. They could not yet perceive the true likeness of Jesus. They saw the towel of service in action, they saw sacrificial love die on the cross, but they could not yet understand Jesus or his Gospel of Love. They would understand on Easter morning, after the resurrection.

True Disciples of Jesus are those who bear the True Likeness of Christ. We are true image bearers when we bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive (Luke 4:18-19). We are true image bearers when we give the hungry food, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick and the prisoner, and clothe the naked (Matthew 25:44). We are true image bearers when we are always ready to give an answer when asked the reason for the hope we have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). We are true image bearers when we show special concern for the orphans and widows in their distress and when we keep ourselves from being polluted by the world by staying true to God’s word (James 1:27). We are true image bearers when we show the same love and spirit and mind as Christ; when we do nothing from selfish ambition; when we value others above ourselves and look to their interests before our own (Philippians 2:2-4).

Being a true image bearer of Jesus is demanding work requiring real sacrifice. Are we up to the task? When people look at us, do they see Jesus? We are the image of God. We are God’s handiwork. We are God’s greatest art project. We are God’s way of showing Jesus to others.

Prayer: God of love, source of mercy and compassion, weave your dream for the world into the fabric of our lives. Remove the scales from our eyes and lift the indifference from our hearts, so that we may see your vision: a new reign of justice and compassion that will renew the earth. Transform our lives, so that we may accomplish your purpose. Anoint us with your spirit of love that we might bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim release to the captive. Give us a new urgency and a new commitment to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, and visit those who live in isolation. Help us to reach out to those whom no one else will touch, to accept the unacceptable, and to embrace the enemy. Surround us with your love, fill us with your grace, and strengthen us for your service. Empower us to respond to the call of Jesus: to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow. Make us your disciples. Amen.

Source:

* Ante-Nicene Fathers, Christian Classics Ethereal Library at Calvin College, ccel.org/fathers2. Retrieved October 18, 2002.
* “Icons of Christ Mandylion & Their History.” <https://www.pallasweb.com/deesis/icons-of-christ-mandylion.html>
* Interview with Protopresbyter George Dion Dragas, Th.M., Ph.D., Tenured Professor of Church History and Dogmatics, Hellenic College, Brookline, Massachusetts, editor of Greek Orthodox Theological Review, [gdragas@aol.com](mailto:gdragas@aol.com).
* “True Likeness of Christ.” Christian Century. September 11-24, 2002, 49.

**The Towel of Jesus**

Maundy Thursday, April 14, 2003 [John 12:12-16](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3a12-16&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

A kindergarten teacher, observing her students while they drew, noticed one little girl working diligently. The teacher asked what the drawing was. The girl replied, “I’m drawing God.” The teacher paused and said, “But no one knows what God looks like.” Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the girl replied, “They will in a minute.”

Did you ever wonder what Jesus looked like? Picture the face of Jesus in your imagination. What do you see? Every society has a depiction of Jesus that portrays him according to their own cultural norms. To some Jesus is a short-bearded Jesus with straight dirty blond hair and blue eyes. To others Jesus is more African with dark skin and wavy hair. To some Jesus looks Middle Eastern with an olive complexion and dark eyes. To others Jesus is more Asian in appearance, like the Mongols of old. Take your pick.

Most typically, Jesus takes on a Mediterranean look, with an aquiline nose, hair the color of walnut wood parted down the middle, hanging straight to his ears, and maybe turning to waves at his shoulders. His beard is dark and long, his skin is tanned. His eyes are a little sad but filled with compassion. Is this how you picture him? Is this his true likeness?

There is an icon of Jesus, painted many centuries ago, with these very familiar features. It is called The Mandylion Icon, from the Greek word meaning “towel.” According to Christian Orthodox tradition, the fame of Jesus as a wonder worker and healer spread far beyond the lands of Judea, where he taught and worked and walked. Across the Euphrates River, in the city of Edessa (possibly the modern city of Sanliurfa in Turkey) lived a governor named Abgar who suffered from an incurable disease (probably leprosy) that neither herbs nor doctors could heal. Hearing of Jesus’ miracles, Abgar wrote him a letter, as recorded by the historian Eusebius:

*Abgar, ruler of Edessa, to Jesus the good physician who has appeared in the country of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard the reports of you and of your cures as performed by you without medicines or herbs. For it is said that you make the blind to see and the lame to walk, that you cleanse lepers and cast out impure spirits and demons, and that you heal those afflicted with lingering disease, and raise the dead. And having heard all these things concerning you, I have concluded that one of two things must be true: either you are God, and having come down from heaven you do these things, or else you, who does*