

March 16, 2025 (Lent 2) – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Reading: Luke 13.31-end

A few years ago, one of my parishioners asked me the following question; ‘Why is it that images of Jesus normally do not show him smiling?’ I was happy with a question like that. Already because I could not come up immediately with any quick answer. So it gave me something to think about. But I also liked the question, because I think it is helpful and good to wonder about what Jesus actually looked like during his earthly ministry. I think that it is a good way of listening to those stories about him, such as the one we just heard, by imagining ourselves being one of those who were in the crowd, or one of his disciples, watching him teaching, acting, dealing with whatever he had to deal with. Trying to gauge his face. And also at our times of prayer or meditation, to think of Jesus as someone with whom we are talking as with a friend. Images of Jesus can be helpful for us to do so. There are of course images of a smiling Jesus, especially in children’s Bibles. But for instance in churches you would rather see many images of Jesus at his time of passion, because it is that aspect of his earthly ministry that is of course so central to our faith. There is an old tradition of imagining ourselves talking with, praying to Jesus while he is hanging on the cross. Something you might want to try out, especially at this time of Lent. Some of you may be familiar with the icons of Christ in the tradition of the Eastern churches. On them, he often looks intently at us in a rather stern and serious way, certainly not smiling. This may also give us the reassuring image of his stable, steadfast and calming presence with us. At home, standing on a side table in my living room, I also have a much friendlier looking Jesus that was actually gifted to me by my sister; a lovely, small, white sculpture that comes from the tradition to meditate on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. And today I brought with me a copy of one of those beautiful portraits of Jesus made by Rembrandt, for which he used a member of the Jewish community in Amsterdam as a model. This one showing Jesus with a rather sad and melancholic gaze. Jesus was of course fully human and so he went through all our human emotions, ranging from deep sadness and pain to great joy. We know from the Gospels that he loved to share a meal and have a drink with his friends and there will have been so many occasions of great happiness, for instance around his many acts of healing.

But in today’s Gospel passage, fitting to this time of Lent, we can see Jesus in a pretty dark mood. At this point, he is aware of his passion and death drawing near. Right before this passage, Luke tells us that Jesus made it clear that “indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” (Luke 13.30).

That is not the kind of message that the elites of his days, nor of our days, would be very keen to hear and so they are plotting against him. At first, it may seem like a nice gesture of those pharisees to warn Jesus that he is in danger. But Jesus knows that these men are sent by Herod Antipas, the man who ordered the killing of John the Baptist. Now Herod probably just wants Jesus to leave his jurisdiction in Gallilee. Let him go to Jerusalem and let Pontius Pilate deal with him and get the blame for it! Jesus is not afraid of any Herod. The foxes are not in control as much as they think they are. Jesus knows that he is not going to die in Galilee, but indeed in Jerusalem. In his words we hear some justified anger when he talks about the prophet murderers of Jerusalem. But then he swings to a different mood, a different tone of voice. A mixture of sadness and compassion, that I see in Rembrandt’s portrait. He speaks of the common people of Jerusalem who are unable and unwilling to recognize him as Lord, using that beautiful motherly image of a hen that wishes to gather her brood under the shadow of her wings. An image which shows Christ’s compassion for all those who reject him and fail to follow his ways in their words and deeds. Compassion for all sinners, including us.

Christ has become human to make real God's passionate dream and compassionate desire from the very beginning of his creation for us humans he lovingly created in his own image. Namely, to keep us as close as possible to him or herself, indeed as a hen with its chicks. That mission and commitment is at the center of Jesus' ministry. God is intimately connected with the whole of creation. The Holy Spirit is always at work in our midst. Jesus came to bring us closer to God and continues to do so as he is always gazing at us. There are many good reasons for anger and sadness in his gaze. And also in ours when we see all the violence, hatred and injustice in our world and sometimes experience it as its victims in our own lives as well. But Christ's gaze is above all full of compassion. And there are certainly also reasons for his great joy, for him smiling. Joy because of all those people, our sisters and brothers in Christ all over the world, who continue to say: 'Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord'. Joy, because of all those who are righteous, strive for peace and show their loving kindness, even towards their enemies. Joy, because of all the wonderful acts of charity, generosity and hospitality to which humans are also capable. And in particular at this season of Lent, let us not forget that there is indeed much joy in heaven because of every sinner that repents and turns around.

Let me end with this song and prayer by St Anselm of Canterbury:

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;

you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.

Often you weep over our sins and our pride,

tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.

You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,

in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.

Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life;

by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.

Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;

through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.

Your warmth gives life to the dead,

your touch makes sinners righteous.

Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;

in your love and tenderness remake us.

In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,

for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.

Amen