

## Fifth Sunday of Easter

Dear parishioners and friends,

The New Testament does not provide any physical description of Jesus. Was he tall, thin or did he have the physique of a young man accustomed to manual labour? Was he good looking and might that have explained why Mary of Magdala, the women at Jacob's Well or those other women who followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem were so fascinated by him? Did his voice have a seductive quality, was it strong and clear. How did he manage to speak to and hold the attention of such large crowds of people, especially when he was preaching outdoors? To none of these questions do the Scriptures give an answer. There are no descriptions of the earthly Jesus and what little the evangelists tell us suggests that the risen Lord was not immediately recognised, or at least that once he was *recognised* it was not because his physical features were those of him who had been crucified. If John is to be believed, it was the wounds of his passion still visible on his risen body that made Thomas and the other apostles convinced that the Jesus who stood among them was the very Jesus who had been their teacher, master and leader who continued to address them, as he had done in Galilee and Judea before his crucifixion, as friends.

Had succeeding generations of Christians not been curious about Jesus' appearance the art of the Orient and of the West would be totally different. The icons of the Eastern Church, the sculptures of the medieval cathedrals, the altar pieces of the Renaissance which are to be found not only in churches but in virtually every great art collection in Europe and America have Jesus as the central figure. We are told in the gospel how some Greek visitors approached Philip because they *wanted to see Jesus*. The apostles whom we encounter in today's gospel wanted to *see* God and asked Jesus specifically how they could satisfy that desire. *He who has seen me*, Jesus said, *has seen the Father*. And so those of us who believe without having seen go to great lengths to have some sort of physical image of Jesus. Here the great art of East and West has come to the rescue: hardly a painter up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century has not been commissioned many times over – we have only to think of Rubens, Van Dyck, Gerrit Van Honthorst or Guido Reni – to paint Jesus. Sometimes it is the infant Jesus in Nativity scenes, sometimes it is the suffering Jesus on the cross, and sometimes these same great artists try to depict what they imagine the risen Lord might look like.

At a time when in many countries churches remain closed or where access is very limited and under strict controls, that desire to *see* Jesus and be in touch with the sacramental mysteries which make him present to us is all the greater. Indeed, perhaps it is the sacrament of Christian art which is most adept at making Jesus present to us in these otherwise dark and confusing days. And, just as we salute and appreciate all our health professionals and 'front-line' workers, so also we might re-appraise the huge debt we owe to Rubens, Van Dyck, the sculptors of Chartres and the tapestry workshops of Brussels who have made Jesus Christ so dramatically present to us, fired our religious imagination and in this time of unique deprivation have enabled us *to see Jesus* and keep the flame of Christian faith alive in our hearts.

**Father Patrick**