

Sweet Jesus, Rebel Jesus

In the 1950's, Jesus looked like he was from Minnesota – white, blue eyes, long, curly hair. In the 1960's, Jesus looked like Che Guevara. In the 1970's, he was a rock star (remember "Jesus Christ Superstar"?). In the 1980's, they were trying to re-create him from the Shroud of Turin, and he looked like someone who ran the delicatessen down the street. In the 90's, he was leaner and more corporate, and, in the new millennium, he hit the front pages because of a movie that marquee'd his torture.

That's just the Jesus of my lifetime, and that's not an exhaustive list. Can a richer, more potent figure be found in history? He has been re-cast, re-shaped, re-configured, re-constructed so many times. But it has to be that way. The overall proposition about Jesus is so absolutely stunning that every portrait resembles but none is definitive. According to Christian creed He is fully God and fully human. The Almighty is approaching us – literally walking into our history and our streets. He is nearer than most find comfortable. This intimacy with the divine is beyond what most can stand.

But with the Godhead as one of us, he becomes ordinary to the point of being preposterous; so eager to share the human experience that it embarrasses. He identifies with the undesirables, he becomes weak, he suffers, and he dies, making a mockery of most divine prerogatives and categories.

Jesus is both overwhelming and scandalous. He is God too close and too familiar. In some ways, it would be better if God stayed far away on a Mount Olympus. Then, we would not be challenged to be redeemed by the God-next-door. It would be preferable, if God must enter human history, that he comports himself a little better. Maybe beat a few more bad guys. Maybe start an empire.

Instead, we have Jesus.

He is at the center of it all, revealing to us not only what it means to be human and what it means to be divine, but, more importantly, he demonstrates that the human and the divine belong together.

The Christmas depictions of Jesus also span this spectrum of Jesus portraits. Even though the Christmas decorations and sales have disappeared, we are still in the Christmas season, at least according to some churches' liturgical seasons. For them the Christmas season runs from Christmas Eve until the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord which, this year, is on January 8th. So, keep those Christmas parties and celebrations going, and we can still take some time to reflect on his birth.

One "carol" that is occasionally played in the Christmastime is *The Rebel Jesus*. If you want to give it a listen you can find a good version featuring Jackson Browne, who wrote the song, on YouTube, Spotify, or whatever music service to which you prescribe. It is a song that acknowledges the gaiety of the season but, at the same time, clearly introduces an alternative understanding of Jesus as one who came to demonstrate a predilection for

the poor and who was punished for pushing against the conventional and the powerful, hence the title of the song.

What seems to be a carol with a sentiment opposite of *The Rebel Jesus*, " is a work by Bach, *O Jesulein süß, O Jesulein mild*, which translates "O sweet little Jesus, O mild little Jesus." I would recommend finding the rendition of this song by Chanticleer. Beautiful harmonies that, at least for me, go right to the heart. The title and first lyrics of the carol are deceptive, though. Instead of dwelling on the saccharine depiction of Jesus that is the focus of most Christmas images of the Child Jesus, the song goes on to spell out the adult mission of Jesus, that is, to be "equal with us poor people," to " bring people comfort in their pain," to "ignite in us the flame of love," so that we might "give back to God the same."

Both Browne and Bach urge upon us the simple lesson that at the heart of Christmas is a profound challenge to follow this person whose life of self-sacrificing love, especially for the outcast, invites us to do the same. The thoughts and feelings that are peculiar to the Christmastime can stir in us what might be valuable to carry into the New Year.