

We've all heard the proverb, "Beware of first impressions." It really is a good one when it comes to people. How often we meet someone, form an impression, and then have it totally upset by later experiences and deeper insight!

I suspect every one of us could tell moving stories of how wrong we've been about someone based on a first impression. It has something to do with the almost infinite mystery of the human person. We are made in the image of God, the Bible tells us. Maybe that's why. God is so beyond our comprehension. So it is with one another at times. Why, you can even talk with someone who has been married 50 years or more and they *still* will tell you there are things about their spouse they don't fully understand.

Now, if this be the case, how much more mysterious must be the person of Jesus Christ! This One in whom the mysterious God lives most fully. It's almost unsearchable – check that, it *is* unsearchable, the depth that Jesus, the Christ, represents. And yet, a lot of us think we know all there is to know about him. Why go to a Bible study? It's the same old message – boring "Jesus talk." Nice platitudes about how we ought to live. Tell me something new.

Peter apparently thought *he* had Jesus figured out. There at Caesarea Philippi, Peter stepped forward, boldly and confidently, to make his great confession: "You are the Christ." Simple. Easy. You can almost see the smug look on Peter's face as he comes up with the "right" answer.

But Peter was to learn the danger of first impressions. Painfully, he was about to discover that Jesus is not so easily defined. For quickly he discovers that his neat definition is much larger, much more dangerous and difficult than he thought. When Jesus revealed the necessity of suffering – the Cross that was to come – Peter's glib definition suddenly seemed full of holes.

In Peter's understanding of who Jesus, the Christ, was, there was no room for the notion of suffering. So Peter reacts angrily to Jesus' statement. You *know* how Jesus responded. He identified Peter's refusal to accept suffering as part of the definition with *Satan* in a rebuke remembered by almost everyone to this day.

Jesus, you see, does not fit into Peter's – or our own – easy formulas. Just when we think we have Jesus all figured out, he becomes larger, more complex, more mysterious. Jesus always remains just beyond our reach, beyond our complete understanding. "Truly God and truly human." What does that really mean? We all feel hard-pressed to explain. We see it, as Paul puts it, "in a mirror, dimly."

I've often wondered if our tendency, at least in most Protestant church architecture, to focus on the *empty* Cross, rather than the crucifix as our Roman Catholic and high Anglican brothers and sisters do, contributes to this. I wonder if we don't, like Peter, want to ignore the hardness of that wood, the nails, the crown of thorns, the spear wound. We cringe at the sight of a bleeding Christ suffering for us. We'd rather look at the more benign images:

- Christ the Teacher
- Christ the Miracle Worker
- Christ the Lover of Children
- Christ the Healer

or, perhaps, the majestic imagery of the *Christus Rex* – the kind of cross we have here at Christ Church – a triumphant Christ, Lord of the Universe, spreading out arms of love, extending them, rather than seeing them painfully nailed to the Tree.

We don't like the painful parts. But Jesus wouldn't let Peter gloss over it – and he won't let us either. He will not let us rest content with our first impressions but calls us repeatedly to focus on the reality of the Cross and discover in that Cross new depths of who Christ is for us and for the world.

And, if you want to know Jesus better, if you want to move beyond first impressions, if you want to move beyond childhood images that are at the heart of all our images of the Christ, you have to focus, gaze, place in the heart of your perspective the Cross, and the suffering love of Christ. That's why we read, and re-read, and re-read, over and over again that long, sad story each Holy Week. To know Jesus is to know his Passion. He cannot be defined without the Cross.

But there's more. We also gain a deeper appreciation of the mystery of Christ, of the power of Christ, when we come into an engagement with the Spirit of Christ, which live beyond that Cross, those sufferings, and which is alive and vibrant and active today. In a sense, what we discover is: the cross is not only a point in history – a long-ago and far-

away reality – but it is relived on the hurricane-savaged seacoast of the Carolinas, and in the continued injustices of so much of the African continent, and in the fearful realities of Palestine and the Gaza Strip, in a grieving family, a victim's face, and in countless other sufferings every day.

If we stop at the Cross, and do not see the Resurrection as well, every injustice, every cruelty, every sin remains. It is the *living* Christ who, too, has been savaged, who lives to be there in Puerto Rico, where even today the ravages of Hurricane Maria bring pain. It is the *living* Christ who, too, has seen injustice, who lives to be there for the people of the emerging nations of sub-Saharan Africa. It is the *living* Christ who, too, has faced fearful realities, who lives to be with the grieving families of 9/11, the victims suffering in Gaza and tens of thousands of other places around the world – and in our very home towns.

It is in these places that we, perhaps, plumb the depths of Christ's grace and mercy most deeply. It is in these things – and in our loving, compassionate response to them – that we begin to glimpse more fully the mysterious Christ we will never fully comprehend.

For this is how Jesus has defined himself. He has defined himself by the Cross. And by his Resurrection.