

## Who is Jesus ?

### Fourth Sunday of Advent

**Micah 5:2-5**  
**Hebrews 10:5-10**  
**Luke 1:39-45**

Who is Jesus? There are three possible answers to this question.

The first is that he is God. Many Christians have held this view that Jesus is God. Jesus may have looked human, he may have behaved like a human being, he may have been indistinguishable from a man. But in the end he was not. He was God in the appearance of man. A very well known Christmas carol seems to take his view for Charles Wesley wrote in *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see  
Hail the incarnate deity

If Jesus was no more than 'veiled in flesh' this would mean that ultimately he did not suffer pain or any emotions: he was quite simply above all that. There are even hints of this in St John's gospel. John presents Jesus as being always in charge, always knowing who was doing what and why he was doing it. For example, according to John Jesus' last words on the cross are

"I thirst". John 19:28

John does not acknowledge that Jesus spoke those words because he was thirsty. John explains he spoke them to fulfill scripture. Then he says Jesus says

It is finished". John 19:30

Or even 'It is accomplished', emphasizing that he is in complete control of the situation. Some have taken that emphasis to an extreme and concluded that all we can say about Jesus is that he is divine.

The second possible answer to the question, 'Who is Jesus?' is that he is human. This is probably widely held in the 21st. Whereas John's

Gospel empathizes the divine side of Jesus, Mark's Gospel emphasizes his humanity. Mark tells us that on the cross Jesus cries out:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Mark 15:34

This is not the cry of a God in charge but a human being who is suffering. Taking to an extreme, some Christians have concluded that Jesus is only human. He truly suffered just as you or I would suffer. He was special to God; he was adopted by God at his baptism; but was not the same as God.

Both of these views have been rejected by the church. It is not enough to say Jesus was divine or Jesus was human: if either of these views was true Jesus would have little to offer. Let me explain why this is.

If Jesus was divine only then not much would have changed by his coming to earth. He was playing at it. He was pretending to be part of our life, our death, our suffering. He was condescending. He was playing the Lord Bountiful.

If Jesus was human only nothing has changed. There have been many people who have been special to God: we call them saints. There have been many prophets and teachers. They are inspiring but they do not change the world in a significant or lasting way.

If Jesus was either human or divine then there remains a huge gap between heaven and earth: it is just as big as it ever was. And if we believe that Jesus was no more than a great prophet then we might as well be Jews or Moslems because they believe as much.

If Jesus has anything lasting to offer he must be both human and divine. This is the third possible answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' and it is the one that, after considerable debate, was chosen by the Church.

It is probably the Letter to the Hebrews which conveys this most profoundly. In the reading we heard today the author makes it clear that Jesus has come into the world to be offered as a sacrifice for sin:

It is by God's will that we have been sanctified, made holy, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all

Hebrews 10:10

The language of sacrifice is not one that immediately appeals to us. But any religious person of Jesus's time, Jew, or pagan, would have known that the way to worship God was through offering a sacrifice; and the way to obtain forgiveness for sins was to offer sacrifice.

The claim of the author of Hebrews is that Jesus's death on the cross is the ultimate sacrifice. And what makes it ultimate is that he is God. It is God who dies on the cross. He could not make that supreme sacrifice were he only human – and there have been many religions throughout history which did offer human sacrifice. And the evidence that Christians immediately believed that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice is simple: we have never offered any other sacrifice. Not so much as a grain of wheat has ever been offered by Christians as a sacrifice. The only sacrifice we recognize is the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, recalled every time we celebrate the mass.

But Hebrews is equally clear that in Jesus we have someone who truly shares our humanity. The author writes

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 5:7-8

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:15

Jesus could not offer this sympathy were he only divine. Jesus can only sympathize with us because he shares our humanity.

This then is the basis for the Virgin Birth. The basis of the virgin birth is the church's well-founded understanding that Christ is both human and divine. And by sharing in his life through our baptism and receiving holy communion we hope to share in his divinity. This is summed up in a prayer spoken quietly by every priest as he mixes the water and wine in the chalice at the offertory:

By the mystery of this water and this wine  
may we come to share in the divinity of Christ  
who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

We can no more separate the divinity of Jesus and his humanity than we can separate water and wine.

And yet in an apparently rational and secular age we shy away from such truths. We explain away the miraculous and play down difficult doctrines such as the virgin birth and even the resurrection. The great danger is that we minimize Christianity and reduce it to very little. All that is left is a good man who lived two thousand years ago and an international institution with a dubious record on human rights and safeguarding. I am not sure if that holds much attraction for me.

The irony is that many people outside the church actually seek the miraculous and supernatural. Buses, billboards, magazines display advertisements for clairvoyants. Clairvoyants do not bother advertising unless there is a market. People put their faith in spiritualists and astrologers. Anywhere it would seem except the church of Christ.

In so many ways I am a rational person. I am a child of my time. I believe in scientific explanations. I have no problem with the theory of evolution. But I also believe that when Elizabeth's child leapt in the womb it was because he recognized that the child in Mary's womb was not only a human baby but also the Son of God. That is the heart of today's celebration.

23rd December 2018