

2. He too shared their humanity - God became man

Date: 4.8.24

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Being Human

Texts: Psalm 8, Hebrews 2.5-18, John 1.1-14 (cf. Colossians 1.15-20)

One of the paradoxes of contemporary society is that we don't want someone telling us how to run our lives, and yet, at the same time, we desperately want moral guidance. We hear things like, "Old cis white men hold positions of authority, and we're suspicious that they say things just to maintain their position at the top of the food chain. They don't know what it's like to be a person of colour, or of diverse sexuality. What right do they have to tell others how to live?" And yet, the same people who say this might then be perfectly happy to go to Yoga, or Meditation where a "master" gives them some pretty exacting instructions on what they should do through the day. Now there is something right about the appeal to experience. All of us appreciate hearing wisdom and insight from someone who has gone through similar experiences as us. I do not know what it is like to live as a woman, or a person of colour or an immigrant or all kinds of people who are not me! And yet at the same time, to suggest that unless you come from exactly the same place as someone else you have nothing of value to say to them is to deny our common humanity. Indeed, hearing from someone who is different from me can help me see things I had not noticed before, which is at least one of the reasons why hearing a diversity of perspectives is good and healthy. I love that picture of the diversity of the church in Revelation, with people from every tribe, and language and nation gathered around the throne, praising the Lamb. What I think this paradox is reaching for is that we want someone who knows and understands us and our struggles, from the inside, someone who loves us, who we can trust, and yet also has wisdom bigger than us who can help us navigate life.

This is the second in our series *Being Human*. We're asking the question "What is it to be human?" in order that we can then answer the question, "How should I live as a human being?" It is a question all of us are confronted with when we look in the mirror, whether you're a Christian or not. Last week we saw that the storyline of the Bible traces the outline of our humanity. That we are made in the image of God. That we are fallen. That Christ has come to redeem our humanity. That we wait for the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting when Christ returns.

This week, perhaps surprisingly, we're looking at the person of Jesus. Why would we look at Jesus to tell us about what it means to be human? Don't Christians believe that Jesus is God?

Here we come to what is called the doctrine or the mystery of the *Incarnation*, from the Latin *in carne*, “in the flesh” which is taken from our Gospel reading - “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. That is, Christians believe that the God who made the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, came to earth 2000 years ago as the man Jesus of Nazareth, who was born of Mary, who died on the cross for our sins and who rose again on the third day and who now is ascended and reigning at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are an attempt by the church to articulate what these historical events mean for who God is and who Jesus is. They are the heart of the Christian faith. They are doctrine because they are what the Bible teaches, (that is what the word doctrine means). But they are also a mystery because although we can work hard to understand who God is and who Jesus is, we can never fully comprehend them.

Why look at the Incarnation when trying to understand what it means to be human? Because in Jesus, God became a human being. What’s more, God the Son remains incarnate such that we rightly speak of him as Jesus, his human name. This fact is the greatest affirmation of our humanity, in every part, from the womb to the tomb. That Jesus is fully human means that he shows us what being human truly looks like. Indeed he is the only human being to have ever got it perfectly right. We are here in some pretty deep waters. St Paul tells us that meditating on Christ is how the Holy Spirit changes us so that we become like him. This is for me one of the key verses in the whole Bible on how we can change and grow as human beings. 2 Corinthians 3.18:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit

Indeed this is God’s purpose for us as human beings - to transform us to be like Jesus. This is the heart of the second stage of our Light on the Hill Vision as a church - that we be transformed by the light of Christ. So that’s what we’re going to spend a few moments doing this morning - gazing upon Christ, and asking the Holy Spirit to do that work of transforming us from the inside out as we find ourselves in Jesus. Just as an aside, what the Holy Spirit is now at work to do in our character, Jesus will also do to our mortal bodies on the day of his return. As we read in Philippians 3.21: “he will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

In the opening chapter of the Bible we read that God created us as human beings in his image. In Colossians 1.15 we read these words, “[the Son] is *the* image of the invisible God”. We’re made in the image of God, the eternal Son *is* the image of God. That means when the one who is *the* image becomes a human being, he shows us how it’s done. He shows us what

it looks like to bear the image of God. Last week I suggested that when Jesus sums up the law and the prophets as love God and love your neighbour as yourself, that these are the summary of how we are to live as human beings. If we look at Jesus' own life in the Gospels we see what this looks like. We see it in his compassion and care for people. We see it in his welcome and love for those on the margins of society, for women, for children, for the "unclean". We see it in how he spoke words of kindness and healing. We see it in how he was not afraid to challenge people in their selfishness and self-righteousness. We see it in his humility. We see it in how he uses his power to serve. We see it in his willingness to turn the other cheek, to not repay evil with evil, but rather to offer forgiveness. We see it in how he endured unjust suffering. We see it in how he entrusted himself to God's care. We see it in how he resisted temptation in the wilderness. We see it in how he constantly sought God in prayer. And perhaps, most powerfully, we see that where Adam disobeyed in the garden, in the garden Jesus says to God, "not my will, but yours be done." Jesus shows us what it looks like to live a truly human life, in love and trust and obedience to God.

But if Jesus was just a perfect example for us to follow, this would not be good news. Quite the opposite. It would be an impossible demand we could not meet and so a crushing burden. It's sometimes a mistake we make, to think that Christianity is just a system of morality or a set of rules. While Christianity does have a vision of what you might call 'the good life', it is not at heart a moral system. Likewise, while Jesus does show us how to live, that is not what he came to do. The reason the eternal Son took on flesh and became one of us was to rescue us. This is the heartbeat, the Good News of the Christian faith. Let's explore this theme of *rescue* as we read it Hebrews 2.

We began our series with Psalm 8 and David's looking up at the stars and wondering what we are as human beings and why God would care about us. Hebrews quotes Psalm 8. The 2011 NIV translation has tried to make the language gender neutral, but this means that we miss the double meaning that Hebrews exploits and the gender neutral translation makes it very confusing. So let's read it without that interpretive move.

‘What is man that you are mindful of him,
the son of man that you care for him?
7 You made him a little lower than the angels;
you crowned him with glory and honour
8 and put everything under his feet.’

David here is of course just using the word "man" to refer to all of us as human beings. But the writer of Hebrews sees the next line, "son of man", and thinks, "Aha! That is Jesus' favourite way to refer to himself!" At the same time, he reflects on our common human

experience. The Psalm may say God has put everything under humanity's feet, but it certainly doesn't feel that way when I get stung by a bee, or when my crops fail. "But," he continues, "I do see the story of Jesus traced in this Psalm":

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. **9** But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Jesus, he argues, is truly human. He has entered fully into our experience, even to the point of suffering death. But in his resurrection and ascension, he has been crowned with glory and honour. Indeed, in his ascension to the right hand of the Father the words of Daniel 7 about "one like a son of man" have come true. He has come to the ancient of days and been given authority, glory and sovereign power.¹ He is reigning at the Father's right hand.² There is a man who now stands eternally at God's right hand. And in him there is room for humanity before God, even you and me, because he tasted death for everyone.

The writer of Hebrews zeroes in on Jesus sharing in our humanity, verse 10.

10 In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. **11** Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

What astonishing words. Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. We are of the same family. Look at the incredible humility of the Son of God! To stoop down to make us his sisters and brothers. Not only so, did you see how in taking on our flesh, Jesus hallows our humanity, touching every part with the life of God, and consecrating it for his service, no matter how small or humble - from changing nappies, to washing dishes, to navigating ageing.

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – **15** and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. **16** For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. **17** For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in

¹ Daniel 7.13-14

² Cf. Psalm 110.1, 1 Corinthians 15.25

service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. **18** Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

There is so much in these verses. Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance teases out some of the logic:

If Jesus Christ the incarnate Son is not true God from true God, then we are not saved, for it is only God who can save; but if Jesus Christ is not truly man, then salvation does not touch our human existence and condition.³

What the writer of Hebrews is doing is exploring just what it means that Jesus is human, and just how the salvation he has wrought touches the human condition. Although eternal and the author of life, Jesus enters into our humanity even to taste death for us. He does so to break the power of the devil, who holds the threat of death over us, filling us with dread. We fear that we will lose. We fear losing those we love. We fear that what we have worked for will be lost. We fear the sign of death in pain and suffering. We fear that we will not be loved. We fear we will lose face. We fear we will lose control. We fear that we will lose our life. The more we give in to fear, the more we find ourselves bound. What do we do with our fear? We try to protect ourselves. We try to take what we fear we will lose. We threaten with the same violence and curse that we fear. And so we become agents of our adversary as we use his weapons.

But Jesus our champion has gone right into the mouth of the beast, death itself, submitting himself to its worst attack so that it might exhaust its power, and break its fangs upon his inexhaustible life. In his resurrection he burst the gates of death asunder so that we be set free from our fear of death. Free to live in dependence upon and trust in the God who freely gives us all we need for life. Switching pictures, Hebrews tells us Jesus is our high priest. On the one hand he offers himself as a sacrifice of atonement to deal with the consequences of our participation in Adam's disobedience. Because he shares our humanity, in every part, he is able to redeem every part of us, our minds, our bodies, our desires, our emotions. He is able to heal and restore all that has been wounded, to piece together the broken pieces of our lives and knit them into something beautiful.

In the 4th century there were great debates about who Jesus was. Was he really God? Was he really man? Was he only a bit of each? Some people argued that Jesus was really God, but he only had a human body, not a human mind or soul. One of the great theologians of the day, Gregory Nazianzus responded with a line that sums up the saving truth of the Incarnation: "The unassumed is the unhealed". By this he meant that if the Son only became human in

³ *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, London, 2016: 149

part, then only that part of our wounded humanity would be healed. So if Jesus only had a human body, but not a human mind, then his saving work could not reach our minds. But Gregory knew his Bible. What did we read in Hebrews 2.17? “He *was* made like his brothers in *every way*.” That means his saving work touches every part of our humanity.

To return to the picture of Jesus as our high priest, not only does he sacrifice on our behalf, because he is human like us, he suffered like us, he was tempted like us and so is also able to help us. Hebrews 4.15 puts it magnificently:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. **16** Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

What sweet words of comfort these are. We have a Saviour who knows exactly what it is like to be human. There is no place he has not been and therefore there is no darkness his light cannot shine, no wound his healing hand cannot touch, no struggle in which he cannot give his mighty hand of grace.

Here is the one who knows and understands our struggles, from the inside. Here is one who loves us with a love as strong as death because that is where he has gone to rescue us. Here is one who is trustworthy because he is good and kind and mighty to save. And so we can hear his voice with the authority of experience, even as he has the authority and wisdom of God to command our obedience. As we listen and obey he will direct our feet on the path of life.

Today, will you come to him? He comes humbly, to show you how to live. He comes gently, to bind up your wounds. He also comes as your champion, victorious over all that enslaves you, even the fear of death itself. Today, will you receive him as your Saviour and obey him as your King?