

## #2 Jesus Human and Divine

### Part 1

For the next few months, I plan to discuss the person of Jesus. What I mean by that is that I'm not focussing on his teachings or the many stories about him. Rather I'll be talking about the issues that are raised when Christians claim Jesus is both human and divine. I hope to unpack the implications of this belief as they apply to our everyday faith and practice as Jesus' followers. In other words, our assertion about the nature of Jesus is not some esoteric theological point but has real implications for our daily lives.

No other religion makes this claim: that their founder or central spiritual leader is somehow both a human being and God at the same time.

Jews do not have one central human being whom they call divine. There are certain leaders such as Abraham, Moses, and David who had a special relationship with God. They are even said to have spoken with God directly. Moreover, there were Old Testament prophets such as Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah who also were said to be in direct contact with God. In the New Testament, several of the apostles spoke with God, including Peter and Paul. However, none of these men are worshipped as God.

In Islam, Mohammad is the central figure, but Muslims would never consider him divine. Rather, he is regarded as being the last and greatest of all the prophets God has sent. It may surprise you to learn that Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and other Jewish teachers and leaders are regarded as prophets.

The essential profession of Judaism, called the Shema, is "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Muslims profess in the creed they call the Shahadah, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is the messenger of Allah." However, Christians confess "Jesus is Lord." In other words, a specific human being who lived in a particular place at a particular time is God.

Next week, we'll start the discussion of what that means for us by remembering the Christmas story.

### Part 2 - Remembering the Christmas Story

The season of Christmas is supposed to be a time of joy. Friends and families reunite and relationships are renewed. Children get excited by the prospect of Santa coming and receiving gifts. Lots of money gets spent. Lots of food and drink are consumed. The American version of Christmas has become so popular, countries like Japan, which have very few Christians, celebrate Christmas with as much gusto as we.

Whether you 'have fun' at Christmas, whether it is a time of joy and celebration for you seems to change from year to year, sometimes even day to day. But having fun or not

having fun is well beside the point of Christmas. In all the holiday hoopla, I fear we forget the most important aspect of Christmas.

Christmas is all about, or should be all about, the fundamental assertion of our faith: God, the only God, the creator God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth — yes that one. God became a human being and entered the world in the same way every human being enters the world: as a helpless baby.

Yes, yes, we display the manger scenes. We attend the Christmas pageants. We attend the church services. But it all seems a bit unreal, doesn't it?

I mean, the concept of Almighty God becoming a human being is hard for our intellect to grasp. So many questions. What does it mean to be God? What does it mean to be human? These are topics few of us can ponder for very long because finding a definitive, provable answer is quite impossible.

Rather, the Christian assertion that God became human being like us is a point of faith. Everything that follows in the story of Jesus is rooted in our believing that it actually happened. Jesus is both Almighty God and a little boy who fell down like every child does and scraped his knees.

If Jesus was only human, then he was also mentally ill because he claimed he personally could forgive our sins, something only God can do.

If Jesus was only God, then how do any of the very human things the gospels claim he said and did enable him to attract the human followers he had? How, otherwise, could anyone approach him and live to tell about it?

These are hard questions and maybe that's why we've turned Christmas into a simple children's holiday.

Next week: The implications of God's humanity for us.

### **Part 3 - The implications of God's humanity for us**

In 10 days we begin the season of Lent. It is intended to be a period of special self-reflection on how our lives are going in general and how acknowledging God's presence in our lives will make them better. Worship in all Christian traditions is often likened to getting a weekly dose of "fuel for our souls" just like when we stop at a gas station to get fuel for our cars. The problem with that analogy is that it implies that we only have to pay attention to God when we feel empty, just like we get gas only when the gauge is pointing to "E".

However, while all worship is intended to refresh and recharge us for the week ahead, we miss the point when we fail to take the message we heard and reflect on it during the week to apply it to our own situation. Worship, in other words, is not a weekly

transaction like getting gas, rather, it is relational, because the overall message and worship experience should serve to bring us closer to Jesus as we dare to allow him more and more into our lives.

And that is what being a Christian is all about — it is how we differ from other human approaches to spirituality.

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He is not a peaceful feeling, because he can give us real peace. He is not an unsympathetic judge, because his judgement of us individually and even all humanity is just, reliable, and true. Yet He is, however, the best friend we will ever have, because he's experienced the highs and lows of all we go through first hand by living on this earth.

Many of us have friends whom we don't see for weeks, months, or even years. Yet we know that if we call them, or if they need us, we will be there for each other instantly. Why? Because we share a common human bond of life experiences and mutual support that can only be described as love.

Christians can say that Jesus loves us because he has experienced life directly. Not as a disembodied spirit, not as a good feeling, not as an abstract philosophical concept. He personally knew love and hate. He personally knew hunger and pain. He personally enjoyed laughter and friendship. He even got angry and told funny stories. Yes, he laughed. You can't be human and not laugh from time to time.

The Christian message assures us that in all the turmoil and doubt which is our lives, there is one person who not only "gets it" but is there 24/7 to love us through whatever it is. We don't have to see him. We don't have to touch him. He is just there.

Next week, how do we know Jesus is really there?

## **Part 4 - How do we know Jesus is really there?**

The problem with having faith, Christian or otherwise, is that people of faith cannot prove it. We can say that we know there is a God. We can say that God is the only logical explanation to account for the existence of the universe. We can point to incidents, miracles, and events both big and small as examples of God at work in our lives and in our world. However, in our scientific, fact-driven 21st century, belief in a personal God who knows us better than we know ourselves is to many, a quaint superstition.

Several hundred years ago, the "Enlightenment" began. Born out of a desire and belief that human beings could over time acquire the knowledge to explain everything that happens in the world, the Enlightenment thinkers advanced the art of science to a methodical system whereby after numerous ideas and tests solid, verifiable facts would be produced. Facts that were not a the whim of the church or the ruler, but facts that applied to all humanity at all times in all places.

There is no doubt that the enlightenment thinkers laid the foundations that have resulted in an explosion of knowledge about how the world works. The earth is round, the earth orbits the sun, not the other way around, the matter we see around us can be separated into smaller components which have specific properties. These are just a few examples. We learned how the human body works, how diseases spread, how to grow food in more efficient ways. Our neighbor Benjamin Franklin was an early leader in exploring the properties of electricity.

In short, the discoveries that were being made in the 16 and 1700's could naturally lead people to believe that everything that happened was explainable. Naturally, that idea applied to religion and faith, which in the minds of many, worked actively to prevent the acquisition of spread of knowledge.

So, what does all of this have to do with knowing that Jesus is with us, not 2000 years ago, but now?

I, just like every other pastor, cannot and will not use the tools of science to prove the existence of God. Knowing Jesus is with you and me ultimately requires a leap of faith that science by itself cannot provide. Science can help us prove that a man named Jesus of Nazareth did exist. He did preach and teach in Israel. He performed healings that the people who were there could only explain as miracles. He was crucified and died and there were a substantial number of people who claimed to see him alive after his crucifixion.

However, the idea of faith is not confined to Christianity in particular and religion in general. When you look at it, science itself is faith based. We don't have time here, but I would suggest you look at "Physics and faith" an article in the December 5, 2011 issue of Christian Century. Or "God in Mathematics" in the April 19, 2016 issue of Forbes Magazine. What might it mean for us if we understand science not as a collection of absolutes, but a cloud of ideas that appear to explain much, but still rest on a foundation of faith — just like the idea that Jesus is with us.

Next week: What is about Jesus that helps us know He's truly proclaiming God's message?

## **Part 5 - What about the healings?**

We move from the essentially "unprovable" issues of faith that claim God actually exists to the utterly provable assertions that Jesus proclaims a message so utterly different from human thinking that its source could well be God. Today, let's look at his healings as one aspect of his message.

It's a shame that when we hear of the various healings Jesus performed in his ministry, our reaction is to use our 21st century minds and dismiss them as fairy tales. On the other hand, we may accept them at face value, but we also proceed to ignore them because we ourselves cannot do the same. We think, "It's great Jesus brought a child

to life, but I can't so what does this have to do with me?" No less a figure than Thomas Jefferson created his own version of the Gospels by taking a razor, literally cutting the gospels into pieces and pasting just Jesus' teachings into his own special book. Jefferson ignored the healings and other miracle stories entirely because in his view, they were just fiction.

Yet both ignoring them either because they aren't "scientific" or because we cannot perform such things ourselves misses the point of these stories. I cannot explain to you the physiological processes that occurred when Jesus healed. I wasn't there. Moreover, the eyewitnesses who reported these events to the gospel writers did not have training in modern science that might have shown that whatever happened defied even current empirical explanations.

All they could say was that before Jesus arrived, such and such was the problem. Once Jesus arrived, everything changed for the better. Somehow, Jesus took a terrible situation and reversed it.

Yet one aspect of the healing stories we generally ignore is not the "what happened" but "who did it happen to?" In Jesus' day, no one understood human biology. No one understood psychology. No one understood germ theory. Rather, they attributed all illness to the will of God. When you were sick, obviously you had displeased God in some way. Therefore, the only way to get better and be free of your disease or condition was to offer appropriate prayers and sacrifices under the guidance of a priest. A key function of religion in general, and religious teachers like Jesus in particular, was that they might possibly be able to somehow "get through" to God and make healing happen.

Jesus was hardly the only religious leader whom people thought had the power to heal. Roman historians reported that in Jesus' day dozens of healers wandered around Israel. The Temple in Jerusalem and the synagogues all over the land were where many went to pray for healing guided by the priests.

What makes Jesus different is often he healed the wrong people! By wrong, I don't mean people who weren't suffering, for they were. By wrong, I mean that Jesus healed those who in the view of most, were outside normal society and therefore didn't deserve it. Remember, the common view that all aspects of life were under God's control. If you were rich and powerful, God must like you. If you were poor and sick, God must hate you. And if you were somewhere in between, keep up with the prayers and sacrifices so things don't get worse.

But Jesus turns all that upside down. He healed foreigners and enemies, like Romans, Samaritans, and Phoenicians. He healed untouchable lepers. He healed a woman who bled nonstop for twelve years. He healed a man whom even in our day would have been sent permanently to a psychiatric hospital. Moreover, he upset the religious authorities by performing many of his healings on the Sabbath — supposedly violating God's commandment not to work that day.

My purpose is not to detail every healing but to help us understand that Jesus continually healed unexpected people at unexpected times in unexpected ways. By so doing, Jesus challenged human ideas about the way the world was supposed to be and that, at the very least, makes him worth listening to.

Next week: we continue with how Jesus' earthly ministry defied conventional ways of thinking — back then, and especially today.

## **Part 6 - What is Truth?**

According to John's account of Jesus' trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, (Chapter 18, verses 37-8) Jesus admits that he is a king and describes his purpose:

“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’”

Indeed, what is truth? The question Pilate asked Jesus 2000 years ago is still the fundamental question of life. We need Truth (with a capital T). We need to have some certainty about how the world works.

There are simple, physical truths such as the sun will appear approximately at a certain place every day, seem to move across the sky, and then disappear at another place. We know the truth that we must eat food and drink water to stay alive. We need to dress warmly when it is cold. We need to care for our children because they can't do it themselves. There is no human being who disagrees with these truths.

But then, things get more complicated. What is the truth about moving beyond our physical needs and into the much more complex business of living life? Over the course of our lives, we have to personally answer some very essential questions. The conclusions we reach govern how we live from day to day. For example, we have to figure out whom we love and why we love them. We have to learn what talents and abilities we possess and how to use them. We have to understand our own bodies and what they need physiologically and medically so we can properly care for them and maximize our lifespan.

You may find these examples a bit strange, what do they have to do with Truth? But one way of looking at Truth is that Truth is our individual understanding of reality. Hence, all of us have our own unique way of looking at the world. In one sense, it doesn't matter how the way we understand truth is “right” or “wrong” from a scientific data-driven point of view. Ask just about any smoker and they will tell you they know the fact that smoking will eventually kill or hurt them in some way. Yet they continue to smoke, despite this objective truth (and, yes, the addictive effects of nicotine, etc.)

Time after time, when we look at the fellow human beings living with us now or in generations past, we may ask ourselves repeatedly why they thought as they did and acted as they did. How could so many Germans have supported Hitler and all the evil he stood for? How, in our Coronavirus-threatened day, can there be people who oppose the concept of vaccination? Why do so many people work at jobs they hate, continue in abusive relationships, or follow certain religious or political leaders?

Yes, there are psychological and economic explanations behind such behaviors, but it still boils down to our personal understanding of reality, our own personal Truth. If, for example, you work at a job you hate, part of the reason you continue is that you've convinced yourself that all alternatives are worse. That is your truth. An outsider may see your situation differently and be able to point out attainable alternatives, but you reject them.

Thus Pilate was, in some ways, correct when he asked Jesus, "What is Truth?" Everyone has their own version of Truth.

Religion is one source of Truth and every religion human beings have followed have claimed to be True. One of the functions of religions is that they provide their adherents with a set of "truth principles" or worldview to help them in everyday life. Religion is kind of a shortcut for living because the claims of the religion have done some of the thinking for you. Atheists or non-religious people still have to answer the same questions about life that we all do. They, however, have to find the answers mostly on their own.

Jesus stated in John 14:6 that, "I am the way, the Truth, and the life." In short, Jesus claims that his particular worldview, his particular teachings, apply not only to himself but to all of us.

Next week: Why should we accept Jesus' worldview?

## **Part 7 - Internal Conflict**

Before we could get into a discussion of why Jesus' ministry defied the conventional wisdom of his day and ours, we needed to explore the nature of Truth. There are over seven billion people on this planet. Therefore there are over seven billion versions of Truth. Each one of us has our own way of looking at the world. Christians believe that Jesus' way of looking at the world should also be theirs.

Of course, there is a great deal of overlap in how the world is viewed by groups of human beings. We are conditioned by many factors. These include physical factors such as our gender, race, age, and overall health. There are geographic factors such as our nationalities, location (urban or rural), climate, and the ease of access to food and water.

We are conditioned by our cultures, which are so complex I'm not even going to explore that avenue. We are conditioned by our religious beliefs and our understanding of the existence of a "higher power," conditioning which is influenced by personal experience, participation (or lack of participation) in a faith community, and the examples of our families.

I can go on, of course, but I think you can appreciate just how many variables go in to making us who we are and therefore influencing how we act in the world and what we say to each other.

Ideally, we all seek a certain consistency in our lives. In other words, we can define our happiness as being in a situation in which the way we understand the world internally pretty much matches our observations and experiences externally.

For example, there are highly diverse ideas and attitudes about the issue of immigrants — not just in the United States but in almost every nation. We debate whether people from other countries should be allowed to enter ours. Some people spread or believe rumors about how strangers or foreigners bring crime, disease, and steal jobs. Such beliefs are hardly confined to the present day. There are endless pictures of signs from decades ago bluntly stating things like, "No Irish Need Apply," or "Whites only," or "Women are not admitted to this college." Prejudice is as old as humanity itself.

The problem comes, of course, when the people who have such ideas actually come into contact with those whom they are trying to exclude. The normal process of such interactions can lead to more and more internal conflicts in those holding prejudicial views. Suddenly, the internal prejudices they have been conditioned to believe come into conflict with what they actually observe in the world. In other words, once prejudiced people have to start working, talking, and interacting with strangers, foreigners, and people who are just plain "different" they often realize that these strangers, foreigners, and otherwise different people are in fact no different from themselves. Yes, there may be outward physical or language differences, but basically, many prejudiced people start to realize that their worldview, their idea of truth, is almost the same as that of the so-called stranger.

People like stability. People like consistency. When they begin to realize that what they have believed internally differs significantly from what they experience externally, they have a conflict. Psychologists call this conflict "cognitive dissonance." Either they have to pretend to ignore the evidence of their senses and experiences or they have to change their internal beliefs to match the new reality.

Is it any wonder that in most countries, people's attitudes about immigrants and strangers are far more open and relaxed in cities and large towns than they are in the countryside? It's caused in part by the fact that people in cities generally must interact with a much greater variety of people than people residing in the countryside. City people who have prejudiced views have to, for the most part, modify them or even abandon them just because of what they experience in real life every day.

So what does all this have to do with following Jesus? Next week I want to start to explain how Jesus entered the world to create more internal conflict in human beings than anyone before or after him. If anyone can be said to be the father of cognitive dissonance, it is Jesus.

Part 8