

THE IDENTITY OF JESUS: 21ST SUNDAY A

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'Who was Jesus?', and *'Who is Jesus?'* These are the most basic questions we can ask about him. The start of questions about Jesus may be traced to his own life-time, as we see from our gospel today. According to Matthew today, he put this question to his first followers: *'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'* (8:17). Next Jesus asks a second question, this time one that invites his followers to take a personal stand: *'But you,'* he says, *'who do you say I am?'* (8:29). Peter answers for them all: *'You are the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God.'* Jesus was, in fact, asking his disciples about his relationship to God, on the one hand, and his relationship to the human race, on the other.

The New Testament, and more particularly the gospels, are our chief source of knowledge about Jesus. But they are not the only source. Knowledge of him is also provided in the creeds (our professions of faith) and our prayer services (such as the Mass). Knowledge of him is also given in those truths which our Church proclaims as revealed by God. Knowledge of him is also available in the faith of Christian people.

This latter source can be a problem, however, as too many people put a full stop after the statement *'Jesus is God'*. They omit or overlook the words that need to be added for the full picture. Those words are: *'and man together'*. So the full statement of faith in Jesus is this: *'Jesus is God and man together'*, together in one concrete being. He is not a hybrid - partly man, and partly God. He is not man + God. He is 100% fully, perfectly and completely human, and at the same time and in one concrete being, he is fully, perfectly and completely divine. That, I admit, is a great mystery, the mystery of the Incarnation.

Jesus is, indeed, totally human and not just divine. As the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer puts it so well, he is *'he shared our human nature in all things but sin'* (cf. Hebrews 4:15). To overlook or neglect his humanity is to overlook the real limitations as well as the real strengths he shares with us as a fellow human being.

While Jesus was all along fully divine, and, in fact, came in time to be honoured as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, he lived his divinity on earth in a fully human way, and with all the limitations that go with being human. So, I have to

answer 'NO' to each of the following claims that are sometimes made about him: - *'As a boy Jesus had the intelligence and will of a grown-up person.'* 'NO!'; *'When he was a baby and a child Jesus knew everything – past, present and future.'* 'NO!' *'Jesus only seemed to be human. Really he was just God.'* 'NO!' *'Jesus ate and drank, but he didn't really need to, because he was God.'* 'NO!' *'The body of Jesus on earth was really different from ours.'* 'NO!' *'Because he was God Jesus did not actually need a body. In fact, Jesus only appeared to have a body.'* 'NO!' None of those statements are true or can be true. For they are all incompatible with being fully human. They are also incompatible with being fully divine in a fully human way.

Being a man of the first century means too that Jesus did not have the knowledge, skills and expertise of a modern man. His age and his world are so different from ours. He had no experience and no knowledge of computers, CDs, DVDs, MP3s, I-pods, i-pads, mobile phones, aeroplanes, motorcars, interstate and overseas travel, radio, television, newspapers, supermarkets, weapons of mass destruction, and space probes. To answer the question, then, whether he, a first-century man, could have made a computer and a television set, the same reply has to be given. 'NO! DEFINITELY NOT!'

Our conclusion must be that in thinking and speaking about Jesus, the divine and the human in one concrete being must always be kept together. But, as I've stressed, some people don't take his humanity seriously, or at least not seriously enough. They see his humanity as largely swamped or even replaced by his divinity. They find it hard, then, to grasp and accept the fact that Jesus had to face real temptations and discover his own vocation, his own career path.

The memory of Jesus raises another important question: - *'What is the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about him?'* To know Jesus personally is to respond to his person and message, to share our lives with him, to follow him, and therefore to change our lives and become better people, more human and humane people. Knowing him involves an experience of his presence, friendship with him, following him, imitating him, trust and prayer. But the knowledge which comes from an inter-personal relationship with him gives rise to a desire, and perhaps even a yearning and a hunger, to know more about him, to learn more about his values and the way he lived his life. Faith in him, then, is a matter of both the heart and the head. When we hear or read about him, then, we expect to hear him in his words and see him in the gospel stories about him.

So, fellow followers of Jesus! Let's look for his presence and his friendship in all the ways available to us! In our search for him may we discover him as the

humanity of God, the human expression of God, the human face of God. God's body-language! One like us in every way except that unlike you and me he was always completely faithful to God and to whatever it was that God wanted of him! What a big difference is that?