

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

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The Jesus of the Gospels was no phantom figure; no unreal, unearthly visitant who passed our way as a shadow of the evening steals across the sky. He was certainly human: however more than Man He was and we know Him to be, He was not less Man. He was quite literally and truly a Man.

He possessed a human body; that fact was made abundantly clear. He took upon Himself our nature with all its limitations, its feelings, its openness to suffering and pain. He came into life in the human way of natural birth after the lapse of the requisite time. He felt tired; He ate; He slept, and so forth.

He possessed a human soul. He displayed those human elements of man's psychical nature which distinguish him from the animals and which make him more than a different sort of somatic creature. He possessed a human mind. He revealed those properties of mind which are characteristically human. He clearly followed the normal mental processes of gaining information by asking questions, by making inferences, and the like. He possessed a human will. Throughout the days of His flesh there were occasions when He had to steel Himself with purpose against temptations and to set His face as a flint to fulfil His vocation. He had choices to make, temptations to meet; all of which show Him to have been conscious of responsibility. What are called the virtues of the will are particularly exemplified by the steadfastness and persistence with which He continued loyal to His friends (Mt. 16: 22), and stood firm amid the constant hostility of His enemies (Mt. 12: 14).

Jesus was, then, both Man and *a* Man: He possessed human nature in all its fulness in the totality of a single personality.

This reality of Christ's full humanity has always been regarded as a necessity for faith's adequacy. So it has always been proclaimed: but the Church has not always been successful in maintaining the reality and the integrity of the human nature of the Word of God incarnate. In broad terms it may be said that in an earlier day, when the "spiritual" world was more readily believed in than the material, the Church found it more difficult to give actuality to our Lord's humanity. Belief in the presence of divine beings was then general. But in recent times the reverse is the situation. The existence of a spiritual realm has receded far from the thinking of modern man: we have become so aware of the material world—the world of space and time—that life and even faith have become secularized. In such a context a Christ more-than-human is less easy to comprehend.

Thus the early Church, while giving assent to Christ's humanity, tended to detract from its reality and integrity in the interests of Christ's deity. He was known by experience and revelation to belong squarely to the divine side of reality, so the question was, how far can such a Being

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be human? The present-day Church, under the influence of the kenotic Christologies and the emphasis upon the divine immanence, knows Jesus as human; as the Peasant of Galilee, the Man-for-others. What authentic meaning, it is being asked, can be now given to His divineness?

For several reasons the post-apostolic Church tended to detract from the full humanness of Christ, while at the same time being aware of the need to safeguard the truth of it as a basic necessity of salvation. Thus there arose, in the period, those who became heretics on this very score; and those who were hesitant within the Church lest by asserting our Lord's humanity they should detract from His deity. But both were found to rob Christ's humanity of its full actuality. The Docetae, it is well known, denied the integrity of Christ's human nature. Even as early as Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, the notion that Christ's body was somehow unreal had taken hold. Against such a doctrine Paul had to accentuate that, 'In him all the fulness of the Godhead took up residence in *bodily form*'. The Letters of John, too, show that docetic ideas had flourished and that there was a readiness abroad to deny that Christ had come in the flesh. But if the heretics sought to reduce Christ's body to a phantom so as to accentuate His position as a spiritual aeon in the hierarchy of emanations, the hesitant within the Church tended, in the interests of maintaining His full deity, to lessen the authenticity of Christ's human existence in the body of flesh.

In the letters of the Apostolic Fathers, the immediate successors of the apostles, two broad facts stand out. On the one hand, assent was given to Christ's humanity. Polycarp of Smyrna, for example, in his letter of the Philippians, regards the Docetae as 'of the devil', and he quotes against them 1 John 4: 13. Ignatius, too, expresses a profound belief in Christ's humanity. He indeed introduces the term 'truly', or 'genuinely' as a sort of watchword against those who were tempted to regard Christ's human life as in any sense unreal. On the other hand, there was awareness of the fact that there was something about Christ which could not be expressed in mere humanistic terms. Christ was among men as the bearer of God's salvation. Inevitably the question arose, Who precisely, then, is this One in whom God is so evidently encountered? The soteriological interest led on to the Christological. Hovering around the borders of the Church's life were those who sought to construe Christ altogether in one or other of His relationships as Mediator between God and man, by regarding Him as a human creature only or as a Spirit being entirely.

Thus arose the heresies of Ebionism and Gnosticism. Ebionism regarded Christ as a human figure "adopted" by God on account of His own goodness and the bestowal upon Him of God's Spirit at the baptism. Gnosticism was "pneumatic" in its basic principles and thus discounted the reality of Christ's human body. Ebionism anticipated the Arian view that Christ is no more than a creature of God; and Gnosticism the Eutychian denial of the permanence of our Lord's humanity.

The Ebionism and Gnosticism of the second century stood opposed to each other; and against each of them the faith of the Church was equally at odds. But both stand as a witness to the fact that a Jesus human only, or a Christ divine only, was not the Jesus Christ of authentic primitive

faith. The names Ebionism and Gnosticism passed away, but the ideas for which they stood reappeared in the third century under that of Dynamic and Modalistic Monarchianism.

The belief in the sole "monarchia" of God was of course, a fundamental tenet of Hebrew monotheism of which the Christian Church was heir. But however could such a view of God, such a faith, be reconciled with the Christian view of Christ's person? Where the theological interest prevailed there was an exaltation of the divine unity at the expense of Christ's divinity. A special influence or "dynamism" of the One Monarchia came to reside in the man Jesus, who was accordingly made Son of God by adoption and grace. On the other hand, where the Christological interest dominated there was an identification of Christ with the one Monarchia. In this case the Incarnation was conceived as a mode or expression of God. From this developed Sabellianism in which the Son came to be regarded as one of the modes in which the one Divine Being was revealed. In neither view was there a true incarnation. And for authentic Christian faith a real incarnation is a soteriological necessity. Thus, Irenaeus declares, it is in the Incarnation, in Christ the God-man, that God came savingly present and is united to His creatures. Irenaeus emphasises Christ's essential humanness in the way he stresses the stark factuality of the Incarnation. Christ, he asserts, was not a human frame inhabited by a divine presence. It is the Gnostic error to maintain that Christ came "through" the Virgin mother but 'took nothing from her'. 'For if He did not receive the substance of flesh from a human being He neither was made man nor the Son of Man; and if He was not made what we are, He did no great thing in what He suffered'. Again the same Irenaeus declares: 'But if the Lord became incarnate for any other order of things, and took flesh of any other substance, He has not then summed up human nature in His own person'. Tertullian likewise gives strong statement to the actuality of Christ's humanness, although as few before him had done, he affirms in the strongest terms the absolute deity of Christ as the Second Person within the Trinity. It is indeed to Tertullian we are indebted for the formula, Three Persons and one God. Tertullian sees the Incarnation as the union of two substances, the human and the divine, in the one person of Christ. But he heavily underscores the actuality of the human against Gnostic docetism. Referring to Christ he says, His was 'a thoroughly human condition'. 'Let us examine', he states again, 'our Lord's bodily substance for about His spiritual nature we are all agreed. It is his flesh that is in question. Its verity and quality are the points of dispute'. The Incarnation was, he affirms, a veritable assumption of flesh. Christ was born "of" a Virgin. We must not, he argues, rob the "ex" of its proper force. It is not, as the heretics would have it, "through" a Virgin and "of" a womb. She who bare, bare: and although she was a Virgin when she conceived, she was a wife when she brought forth. A phantom Christ with an unreal body, he insists, is of no value to the saving of men. He would be but a cheat and a deceiver: not the High Priest of our salvation but a conjuror in a show. This is to be by all means believed because it is absurd.

Despite these strong statements, however, there were hesitations about giving Christ's humanity too human actuality. Even Irenaeus sees no

incongruity in referring to His body as a “shadow”—‘a shade of the glory of God covering him’. Origen, too, conceived of His body in such a “spiritual” manner as to raise doubts about its reality and integrity. And the great Athanasius could contend that Jesus ate not because He needed food, but because He would make concession to the faith of His followers.

We have seen that according to the Gospels Christ had a human body: the Docetae and Gnostics denied it because in their view “flesh” was too mean and too sinful a condition for the divine to make contact with. The Church maintained that it was necessary for God to enter fully into human flesh that man might be redeemed. But some were hesitant like the Ebionites and Arians, who in making Him fully human ended up with a Christ human only.

But Christ has a human soul, according to the evidence of the New Testament. Here again failure to give the clearest recognition to the fact led to hesitancy and heresy. Athanasius left out of reckoning the possession by Christ of a human soul in order to secure his changelessness. While he does not in so many words reject the human soul in Christ as a ‘physical factor’; he certainly does reject it as a ‘theological factor’. He was of the opinion that the manhood of Christ is confined to the assumption of a body only. It is for this reason that he has to explain the psychical displays as bodily conditions which Christ permitted but which were not real to Him. He asks the question, ‘Is Jesus Christ man, as all other men, or is He God bearing flesh?’ He has no doubt about the answer. He is no ordinary man: for if He were He would have ‘to advance’ according to the stages of human life. But what advance had He who is equal to God? he asks.

But if Athanasius refused to Christ a human soul to repudiate the suggestion that He underwent development, Arius took the same line for exactly the opposite reason. It was Arius’ avowed purpose to show that Christ as Son was neither free from change or from the possibility of sinning. He contended firmly that Christ took a body without a soul. The soul element was supplied by the Word and since Christ showed feelings, acknowledged ignorance, admitted to change, this means that the Logos element in Him could not be authentically divine because imperfect and mutable.

The Arians adduced such passages as Luke 2: 52 as allowing for Christ’s moral growth: Jn. 12: 27 as evidence for His anxiety: Mt. 26: 39 as illustrating His fear of death: and Mk. 13: 32, Jn. 11: 34 and 13: 31 as proof of His ignorance. But in their effort to show the reality of His human experiences they failed altogether to take account of the complete data for a full understanding of the person of Christ, which both the biblical picture and Christian experience provided. It is not then without significance that they preferred the phrase ‘made flesh’ to that of ‘was made man’ which was favoured by the Fathers of Nicaea.

According to the biblical witness Christ had a human mind. For the very best of motives Apollinarius, bishop of Laodicea about 361-390 refused to allow that Christ in the days of His flesh possessed a human mind or *nous*. Apollinarius was concerned to refute the view that Christ was a mere man indwelt by God and that He was morally changeable. He

therefore denuded the humanity of Christ of a human soul or mind and replaced it with the divine Logos. Thus, while normal humans are made up of the trichotomic elements of body, mind and spirit; Christ possessed the three constituents of body, spirit and Logos. For Apollinarius, Christ was a combination of the human and divine in which the human element was virtually deified by being taken up into the divine pre-existent Logos. Christ is not, then, a unity of two natures; but a 'new nature' and 'a wondrous mixture', as he puts it. Apollinarius wanted above all to deny to Christ the possibility of free choice. According to the current psychology the human mind was regarded as possible of self-determination by being impelled by its own volition. Yielding to temptation became consequently virtually inescapable. To avoid this conclusion in the case of Christ, Apollinarius substituted in Him the Logos for the human mind thereby guaranteeing His removal from openness to sinning. The human mind, he says, is the prey of filthy thoughts; but His mind was divine, changeless and heavenly.

Honourable as was Apollinarius' intention the result was to make the temptations of Jesus unreal. They were addressed to One who, by the very constitution of His nature, could make no response.

And, as Gregory of Nazianzus was not slow to point out, the more serious issue was to undercut the whole doctrine of salvation. For if Christ did not take a human mind, which according to Apollinarius was the seat of sin, then we are not redeemed: what is not assumed, declared Gregory, is not healed.

The result of this excursion into the history of Christian doctrine will be to show (i), the fatal consequences which follow when any one element is dropped out of reckoning Christ's humanness. It needs a Christ fully human to redeem humans fully. The Incarnation was neither a metamorphosis nor a masquerade. It shows (ii) that the acceptance of the New Testament witness to Christ's humanity becomes a challenge to faith's thinking.

Right here comes the problem of Christology. For if the New Testament presents Jesus as in all essentials a human reality, and efforts to explain His person by eliminating some aspect from His human make up only leads into error, then no account of the relation in Him between the human and the divine is possible which detracts from the human in the interests of the divine; or, indeed, of the divine in the interests of the human.

There must be consistency in relating the facts. And the facts are clear enough. He knew He was fully Man and He knew He was more than man. Yet He presented Himself as One Christ; not as two beings in one skin. There was nothing schizophrenic about Him. In the one person of Jesus Christ the fulness of manhood and the fulness of Godhead unite: and unite in such a way that there is no diminution of either.

Jesus Christ does not present Himself as a juxtaposition of two beings overagainst each other. It is not, therefore, proper to speak of Him as God *and* man, with the conjunction "and" suggesting a separation. He is rather to be spoken of as the God-man; as God "enmanned".

Of course there are questions here which cannot be avoided. There is the pressing issue of Christ's knowledge. Was His knowing process normal? All of us know that human learning must follow the slow process of here a little, there a little. It is for us certainly true that knowledge is built up by stages. But what of Him?

In this connection two statements from Scripture may be put side by side. Luke 2: 52, 'And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man'. John 3: 25, 'he needed not that any man should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man'.

We would suggest that we have here reference to two types of knowing arising from the duality of Christ's person. As regards the first in which knowledge has reference to human realities Jesus learned as others learn. He surely attended school and gave Himself to acquiring knowledge. And there in the carpenter's shop He came to an understanding of the methods belonging to His trade. He learned to live with others—and for them.

But there is another way of knowing—a knowledge of spiritual things arising from man's relation to God. For us, for whom that relationship is broken by human sin and folly, that way of knowing is not natural. For us it arises only from a restored relationship; a relationship brought about by God's own initiative in grace.

But with Him that relationship was unbroken. There was no stain or strain upon it. His fundamental unchanged community of being with the Father was the source from which His knowledge of spiritual realities sprang. There is a knowledge of human things which can only come in the human way of learning; and He was human, truly human. But there is, too, a knowledge of spiritual things which derives from union and communion with God. For Him that union was never torn nor was that communion ever tainted. In the realm of spiritual realities such knowledge was for Him intuitive, immediate and inclusive. Jesus, we can accept, learned the history of His people like any young Hebrew. But the God of Israel He did not come to know. Some things He must learn as any other: but what belongs to God He need not learn. For He has not lost His contact with God; He lived with God always. While He was here in the days of His flesh He was still the Son of Man which is in heaven.

There is another question here concerning the knowledge of Christ: Was Christ's knowledge imperfect? Again two statements from the New Testament may be set side by side. Mark 13: 32 'Of that day and hour knoweth no man, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father'. Matthew 11: 27 '. . . and no man knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any man know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him'. Something has been already said about *the way* of knowledge when we brought into juxtaposition the other two verses. The two now before us have to do with *the area* of Christ's knowledge. We have Christ's own statement that there was one thing He did not know;—did not know because it was something which could not be known by inference or learned by observation.

Does this mean that His knowledge was therefore deficient and imperfect? We need to be clear first of all that in the Matthean reference Jesus makes it certain for us that He possessed a knowledge of the Father

which was absolute. He knows the Father utterly as He is so known by the Father. But in the context of His human condition He cannot know that which cannot be known by the human process of learning.

This fact is not to be read as evidence for any imperfection in Christ's knowledge, but rather as proof that He was fully human. Perfect knowledge, if by that is meant complete knowing of everything that can be known, is not a property of even a perfect man. To be human is by definition to be limited. Not to have complete knowledge is a fact about man *qua* man, and since He was made man He was not ashamed to say "I know not". Far from this meaning that His knowledge was imperfect, it is rather to be taken as affirming that the area of His knowledge as man was conditioned by His nature as truly man.

We are not, in saying what we have just said, breaking the ancient dictum,—neither to confuse the natures or divide the person. We are simply making the important point which the biblical data demand: that the dual nature of the one person of Jesus Christ shows evidence of a dual knowledge. There is a knowledge which must follow the human process, and a way of knowing God which is not attained by that method. This fact is not only shown by a reading of that whole tenor of the New Testament record, but is suggested by a remark of Peter when he said to our Lord, 'Thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee'. Peter uses two distinct words for 'know'; which tie in with the point we have been making. You know all things; Yes, Christ did know all things because of who He is; but you know by your experience of me, Peter adds, that I love you.

All of us are aware of what the whole New Testament makes clear that there is one way by which we come to know earthly things and another way of knowing the things of God. These two ways of knowing must inevitably be exemplified in Him who is at the same time the God-man. Because He confesses that the day and the hour He did not know, He shows Himself to be authentically of man: and because He declares that no man knows the Father except the Son, He reveals Himself to be absolutely of God.

It is not necessary at such a time as this and in such a place to say anything about the theological and spiritual significance of the doctrine of Christ's humanity. But the fact of His full humanness is a comfort and a challenge to faith. It is something to know that there is a Man on the throne of glory; One who knows every twist and turn of our human ways. The Epistle to the Hebrews draws out the meaning of Christ's humanity for us; and the divine sympathy which it assures and the full salvation that it implies.

There is no reason, then, to sell Christ's humanity short. For it is the plain fact of the New Testament and the highest claim for the Divine Revelation of God in Christ that it be frankly recognised that He was a Man. Adam, as Irenaeus says, was the first potential man, while Jesus was the first actual human. And because He is that He shows us that human life is a God-given condition. He makes clear also that concern for human life is a God-given requirement: and by being a Man in the conditions of our human experiences, thus linking Himself with humanity,

He tells us plainly that the human family is more significant than a particular people.

In His living as man Jesus had the victory which controls but does not eliminate temptations: and as Richard Baxter says,
‘Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than He went through before’.