

The Word Made Flesh

We have spent quite a bit of time this Advent season, and this Christmas season, hearing about and wrestling with, immersing ourselves in the humanity of Jesus. The human Jesus. The man of flesh and blood, just like you and me. We were there at his baptism by cousin John in the Jordan.

Did you hear the river tumbling down the Jordan? Did you get a glimpse of John, unshaved, animal skin clothes; did you feel the excitement of the people? And Jesus himself, wading into the water, going under, soaking wet, coming up to a vision of the Holy Spirit.

Our brother was pushed into the desert by that same Spirit where, for a long time, he faced the temptations of power, fame and wealth. So thirsty. So hungry. So tempted. The man Jesus.

He wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He wept at Jerusalem's gate. The man who, after giving his very first sermon in his hometown, was nearly thrown off a cliff by his outraged neighbors. And all of this had its start in the strangest of places: born into the smell of a garage for animals, greeted by shepherds, to an unwed teen. It doesn't get much more human than that.

So these weeks, we have been soaked in the humanity of Jesus. And rightfully so. Need fully so. This is why.

One of the earliest false teachings, misunderstandings, lies, deceits, what the church calls heresies, was this: Docetism. Have you heard of it? What does it mean? It was this.

That Jesus was not really a human being. He was only God, wearing his humanity as our children wear Halloween costumes. His body was nothing more than a disguise, outerwear, not real. So though he appeared to weep, he never. Though he appeared to be tempted, he wasn't. Though he appeared to suffer and die, he didn't.

We have a modern version of Docetism. It affects a great many of us, to one degree or another. The modern version makes out of Jesus a blond-haired, blue-eyed, pious, plastic, savior, who is so completely different from us that he has nothing to say to us. That was the central problem with the original Docetists.

If Jesus is simply God in disguise, we can never do what he did. What he teaches we cannot follow, because God cannot expect us to do what only God can do. And here's the rub. Much of modern Christianity falls right into that trap.

In the first three Gospels, and much of the fourth, Jesus is not preaching Jesus. Jesus is not making himself the center. Jesus is preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus is preaching the Kingdom of God. Jesus preaches God.

He lived the life of the Kingdom by declaring God's free forgiveness, declaring God's preference for the poor, the alien, the outcast.

He lived the life of the Kingdom by confronting the powers and principalities of the world, with love and non-violence, always seeking the lost, always challenging the self-assured. And it is this life that we Christians are baptized into.

To be a follower of Jesus is not to be an admirer of Jesus. It is to do what he did; in the very real, everyday life, we lead.

And because Jesus was fully human, we cannot take that back door and escape, saying, with the Docetists, he wasn't really human, so what he did, I can never do.

This is what it comes down to: In Jesus, we have the unmistakable claim that God puts on each and every one of us, on you and on me. That claim is for it all. He wants our hopes, our dreams, our failings, our frustrations. He wants it all, and we, so many times, say: "no thank you."

It is not a new problem. In the powerful story by Dostoevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, the problem of worshipping a plastic Jesus versus doing what Jesus did, is laid bare.

In the story, Jesus is once more among us, in the flesh, in Spain, during the Inquisition, when the church tortured and killed its opponents.

"He came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognized him. The people are irresistibly drawn to him, they surround him, they flock about him, follow him. "

"An old man in the crowd, blind from childhood, cries out: "O Lord, heal me and I will see you!" And, as it were, scales fell from his eyes and the blind man sees him. The crowd weeps and kisses the earth under his feet. Children throw flowers before him, sing and cry 'Hosanna!' 'It is he!' 'It is he!'"

"He stops at the steps of the Cathedral, at the moment when weeping mourners are bringing in a little, open, white casket. In it lies a child of seven, the only daughter of a prominent citizen. The dead child lies hidden in flowers. 'He will raise your child,' the crowd shouts to the weeping mother."

"The priest, coming to meet the coffin, looks perplexed, and frowns, but the mother of the dead child throws herself at her feet with a wail. 'If it is you, raise my child!' she cries, holding out her hands to him."

"The procession halts, the coffin is laid on the steps at his feet. He looks with compassion, and his lips once more softly pronounce: 'Little girl, arise!' And the

child arises. The little girl sits up in her coffin, looks round, smiling with wide open, wondering eyes, holding a bunch of white roses they had put in her hands.”

“At that moment, the Grand Inquisitor passes by. He sees it all. The coffin. The shouts. The little girl getting up. And Jesus is arrested. Taken to jail. Where the Grand Inquisitor himself demands: ‘Why have you come to trouble us?’ ‘Tomorrow you will be burned at the stake as the worst of the heretics!’”

“The Grand Inquisitor continued: ‘You give people freedom, but all they really want is bread. All they really want is security. They want to worship you, not follow you.’”

“At the end, he saw that the prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face. The old man longed for him to say something, however bitter and terrible. But he approached the old man in silence, and softly kissed him on his bloodless, aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the door, opened it, and said to him, ‘Go, and come no more ... come not at all, never, never!’”

“The prisoner went away.”

Why follow Jesus? Why take the risk? Why?

The plastic Jesus is so much easier. There is nothing safe about the real Jesus. The whole notion of dying to live, giving up to get, surrendering to win, is completely insane,....., except for one thing: today’s gospel.

For in today’s gospel, all of the humanity of Jesus, all of the blood, sweat, tears, laughter, joy and excitement are verified as being rooted in nothing less than God himself. Just as Jesus is fully human, so is he fully divine.

It is a mystery of our faith. It is the bedrock of our faith.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Sit with it for a moment.

Take it in.

Ponder its meaning.

In Jesus, we see God, face to face. In Jesus, the Creator of all things speaks to us directly. If this is so, what greater security could we seek? What other promise could we possibly put our trust in?

“Follow me,” Jesus says. “What I did, you do.”

Meet hate with love. Forgive 7 times 70 times. Raise the dead with reconciliation.
Walk the extra mile. Accept with joy, that even as we fall and fail, we are forgiven.

Into our very human life, the eternal Word has come. Come, let us follow him.

Amen+