

## Jesus, the Son of Man

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It is Saturday morning, you are in the garden with your arms full gathering hedge clippings, or maybe you are in the kitchen preparing meals for six children and a screaming baby, or maybe you are up a ladder balancing three pots of paint about to embark on the Cistine Chapel ceiling. (KNOCKING ON DOOR) Who is that calling?

It is the..... JEHOVAH's WITNESSES (they always choose a moment like this) Does your heart thrill with delight? A frisson of anticipation? The anticipation of witnessing back to the witnesses? The joy of a no-holds-barred theological debate? (If I can get past Elaine holding the door shut) I welcome them with open arms.. I pride myself on making them BEG TO LEAVE, to cry for mercy, to say they really have a very important appointment elsewhere.

What I enjoy is that they have learned an approach to a potential convert, and you can see it coming. They first find out category of person you fit into. Are you a Catholic? An Anglican? A born-again-Christian? They want a label, then they know which arguments they can trot out.

I enjoy this, because I enjoy wriggling out of their categories. What church am I a member of? The Holy Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church? No, the Holy Catholic Church, the fellowship of all believers... polite puzzlement, this one isn't in their book .. I want to slip out of their categories, to make them think, to meet them in arguments they had not expected. Part of this desire in me is I know human pride; we need to be cleansed from it and forgiven it. But perhaps part, if only a small fraction, is doing what Jesus did

If we read the Gospels, Jesus was into teasing and tantalising his listeners, he was into deliberate ambiguity. We see this in his preferred self-designation, his favourite title, the way he most often spoke of himself, and that was as SON OF MAN. In the Gospels he uses it 81 times. The title he used the **most** we use the **least**. When I surfed around Christian sites on the net, which claim to offer all sorts of concordances and helpful explanations, I typed in 'Son of Man' on their searches and came up with 'not known'.... very strange.

We haven't used it here at Stepping Stones either. That is why this talk has ended up as the seventh in a series of six on the names of Jesus.. Because we too had not initially included Jesus favourite title as one we should consider. Why ? Because it is not straightforward, not easy to fit into our theological systems, it is one we have to think about, to get our brains down from the shelf.

The ambiguity is that 'Son of Man' has, a more theologically-versed friend tells me, two possible meanings. One is that Jesus was taking the title from Daniel 7/13. This is part of Daniel's dream of the four beasts, and is all real heavy-metal apocalypse stuff; but after the four beasts have done their worst, he sees 'one like a son of man' coming on the clouds of Heaven, the victor, whose kingdom will have no end, the Messiah. But the title has a much more prosaic meaning, in the Hebrew 'Ben Adam', son of Adam or simply human being. So to use it would have seemed ambiguous, making people think, you needed eyes to see and ears to hear...

Jesus used it of himself, often in the context of fortelling his crucifixion, suffering and

rejection Mark 8.31; he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He was the fully human being, at the one time the servant of and the sacrifice for humanity, that is, for us. It is a phrase to wrestle with, that demands thinking about - for instance, 'Son of Man' can sound strange used by the only person who has ever walking this earth who was not the son of a man...

A basic doctrine of the whole Christian church is that Jesus is fully God and fully human at the same time. It is a PARADOX; we affirm it by faith, we can never really get it into our heads, it is too big a truth for our limited cranial capacity. So we all say OK to it as a proposition, but what does it mean?

Basic doctrines are good things, they are there for a purpose. What this one does is hold us back, restrain us, from running into one of two errors. You see, in practise we tend to emphasise **either** Jesus' divinity **or** his humanity. At the evangelical end of the church, I think our danger is that we emphasise the first at the expense of the second. Let me give you an example. A few weeks ago I got an unsolicited e mail, a piece of Christian spam; it was about a new flag that a group of praying ministers felt they had been led to launch upon the world. It bore a royal crown; it should be flown in public places by groups of men (no women) and, when people gathered round to see what it was all about, they should explain that it ushered in Christ's kingly rule. It was time to do away with 'weak symbols' like the fish (and perhaps also the crown of thorns, and cross?). Enough of the humanity of Christ, it was time to stress the divinity. Strength was in. And, by the way, they had been compelled to copyright their flag design, see, lo and behold, here was a whole list of merchandise, not only the flag itself but wallets with the flag embossed upon them etc which you could purchase from their website.... I sniffed the air, and, yes, a whiff of sulphur... Uncle Sam's special brand.

You see, the Son of Man, the Scriptural Jesus, who came in humility, did not appeal to these people at all; it was out with the Suffering Servant, in with the Conquering King who would destroy his (and their) enemies, zap the infidels, sort the world out the way they thought it should be. Just like some of the disciples (maybe Judas) who wanted Jesus to use his powers to throw out the Romans..

But we must take a look at the other end of the spectrum, the liberal understanding of Jesus as more Son of Man than Son of God, the people who under the guise of humility glorify doubt and struggle with the divinity of Jesus. Dennis Potter wrote a play called 'Son of Man' on the theme of a Jesus who struggled to believe who he was, and which, inevitably, like the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, ended with the crucifixion. There is a rather beautiful song by Ralph Mc Tell called 'Jesus wept' that empathises with the human Jesus but then gets it all wrong by writing off the divine and miraculous. We are not free to do that, to pick and choose the bits we can relate to. But Sidney Carter wrote a song which I think rightly expresses the implications of a fully human Jesus:

If you are a son of man you wonder where you're going  
And what will happen when you die - there is no way of knowing

They talk about a heaven and they talk about a hell  
But whether they are right or not no son of man can tell

But if I were the Son of God and if they crucified me  
I'd think I was luckier than those who hung beside me  
I'd know that I would rise again and all thing would be well  
But when you are a son of man however can you tell?

If you are a son of man they you can be mistaken  
You hang upon the cross of doubt and feel you are forsaken  
And whether you will rise again is more than you can tell  
And if you were the son of man you've tasted this as well.

(Interestingly in the 'Faith Folk and Clarity' book, when they reproduce the words of this song they print 'Son of God' with capital S and G, and son of man, Jesus' chosen title, with lower case....)

What Sidney Carter is saying is that whatever you feel, wherever you have been, Jesus has been there, even in the place of feeling totally abandoned by God; I think his cry from the cross shows that. There is nowhere darker than that.

But **here comes the ambiguity**. Jesus also seems to have used the title in the sense that Daniel had all those years before, the Son of Man who will come at the end of time in Judgement; that is clear in quite a few of the 'Son of Man' quotations; they deal with the End, the Second Coming.. The suffering servant becomes the coming king. Perhaps that final judgement is foreshadowed in Matthew 16.13 when he asks his disciples 'who do people say the Son of Man is? And then **'what about you? Who do you say I am'** prompting Peter's response 'You are the Christ the Son of the Living God' That is a pre-run with the disciples of the questions that will be asked of all humanity. We are not puppets, God has given us the honour of having an opinion, of making a free response, we can run to him or run away from him.

And what does knowing Jesus as Son of Man, as God and Human, mean? Here I am struggling a bit for words, let me give you a picture that might help explain how it feels to me. Maybe you can identify with it. It is half memory of experiences, half private fantasy. I have been to some big Christian do, with whole droves of people getting excited, and maybe some big name speaker or worship leader getting everyone going. People are expressing their worship and excitement, and I am feeling guiltier and guiltier about the fact that the whole thing turns me off. We sing choruses like 'Lord I want to be a wriggling worm crushed underneath your feet' or, more worryingly still 'Jehovah says Smite!' and I face a rising tide of nausea, and the voices saying 'well, if you don't enjoy this, you can't really be a Christian after all'. At last I escape, and get away from the hordes, I just want to do something ordinary and secular, I am in a stuff-religion mood. Then there is a gentle tap on the shoulder and a voice says 'I'm still here you know'...

Because if Jesus is Son of Man, he is present in our humanity, and humanity is unique and individual to each of us. God made it that way, way back at the beginning he crafted a space for himself, the most human of all humans, in the very core of our beings - use whatever

words you like, in our warp and woof, in the molecules of our DNA. Go inside, through all those doors, walk down that long and winding stairway that starts inside your head, and in the innermost room of all he is there, or if he isn't he should be; it is designed for the two of you together, the real human and you. You cannot be fully human without his presence, because he is the full human, you cannot really be human without being Christian. Conversely, you cannot be Christian without being human (although some of us really try).

Jesus talks about he and the Father together coming to dwell in us. John 14.23. **If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.** Living with us, in all of life, not just the spiritual bits. Heaven preserve us, the last thing he wants is to make us religious! And if this God-in-the-centre is our reality, we don't need to ham it up, to play act to convince ourselves, to do the things those old Pharisees used to do to convince people of their holiness. If Jesus and God were just figments of our imagination, just a wish-fulfilment dream, then we would need to make ourselves, and other people, behave in a certain way, psych themselves into a certain sort of experience, to programme them in exactly the right way. But we don't, because he is real, he is alive, he is more human than we can ever be, and can make us more human than we could ever be without him. He may await our invitation to come; we are free to refuse, to prefer our own version of humanity to his....

Recently Max was able to give me a copy of an old album by Parchment from around thirty years ago, 'Hollywood Sunset', and it contains a song talking about a dream in which the writer met Jesus; it was criticised at the time because it says things like 'all I saw was the back of his head, and his footsteps fell slowly and silent' but then comes the refrain' and he said 'it doesn't matter where your sympathies lie, follow me if you want to join the fight'

I want to end this meeting in a different way to usual. We are pretty liberated, but still can fall into the danger of being religious at some times and not at others. At the end of a service you expect someone up front to sign off, to metaphorically pull a cord so that big trapdoor in the ceiling (up to where God lives) will slide shut. Goodbye God! It's been great talking to you! See you next week, same time, same place? (but phew, what a relief, now we can get on with being human and have coffee and talk about ordinary things)

But there is not going to be a signing off or a benediction or a final hymn today. He is here, he is with us. If the Son of Man is present in our humanity now, he's not going to leave, now, over coffee, this afternoon, tomorrow, next week, or until the phase-one earthbound bit of being human is over for us. Let's have coffee.