

Jesus is Human

Hebrews 2:14 – 3:1 p1202; John 1:1-14 p1063

The Apostles creed declares that Jesus “was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilot, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead.” Today we continue our series of study on The Creed, by considering our belief that “Jesus is Human”.

The gospels tell us that Jesus was born, grew up, lived and worked among many people, had a very public ministry, grew tired and hungry, showed profound compassion and love, suffered, died a horrible death, and was buried. As far as I am aware, during his life-time nobody questioned his humanity. Yes there was a debate about who he really worked for – God or the Devil – but not about his being human.

Later on, having worked out that in fact Jesus was the Son of God, and shared fully in God’s divinity, then people struggled with his humanity. Could he possibly be both God and Man at the same time? This is what our creeds and the New Testament affirm. He was both Jesus, and Christ.

The struggle to explain this has led to one of the most beautiful, profound and uplifting passages in the whole of scripture – the opening of John’s gospel. Having introduced the very agent of God’s creation “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” John goes on to declare that this very same Word became human “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

The writer to the Hebrews declares exactly the same truth, but adds also that for God to become human was absolutely necessary to reconcile us with God – he writes “For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”

In other words, unless Jesus was both fully human and fully God, he could not represent us to God, and could not make atonement for us – but only for himself.

The idea that humans can become like God goes back to the fall – to be like God was the original temptation. Egyptian Pharaohs and Roman Emperors claimed deity. Apparently the organiser of a feast was baffled as to where to sit the Aga Khan, and so obtained this clarification from the British Heraldry Society: “The Aga Khan is considered by his people to be the Son of God, he follows an English Baron.”

Paul Little, in his book Know why you believe – p127 describes how he was talking about the deity of Christ with a Japanese professor. His friend said “I find it difficult to believe that a man could become God.” Paul replied “Yes, Kinichi, so do I, but I can believe that God could become a man.” Shortly afterwards Kinichi became a Christian.

And that is the point. Humans might aspire to deity, but they cannot become God. Jesus did not become God. God created humanity in his own image, and God took the initiative to become human. God chose to become Jesus for us.

The very names Jesus used for himself – ‘The Son of Man’, and, ‘The Son of God’ – both proclaim this dual reality. The title ‘The Son of Man’ is almost meaningless unless it stated in the context of the

Godhead – within the Trinity this person is uniquely human; among the Godhead, He is The Son of Man. Similarly the title ‘The Son of God’ only makes sense when it points out a human like no other, a human who is also God; among all of humanity this is The Son of God. Each of these titles fully encompasses both Jesus divinity and his humanity.

So how well does Jesus live up to the claim to be ‘fully human’? (as the writer to the Hebrews declares.) To answer this we must first answer the question “What does it mean to be fully human?”

That is a much tougher question to answer than you might think. In fact I’ve recently finished a 10-week course entitled ‘being human’ which sort of scratched the surface. It’s a question that has become much tougher recently as humanity seems to be going through a major identity crisis.

What distinguishes humanity seems to be getting eroded from all sides. We have witnessed just nine days ago in Christchurch the horrific result of false ideology, ideology that suggests some of us are sub-human, that we don’t deserve to live. Others would turn to science and claim that human DNA defines humans, and yet our law denies human rights to any unborn DNA Bearer under the age of 24 weeks. On the other side, some claim that we are just clever animals, and seek to give human rights to their pets. Karl Lagerfeld, who died recently reportedly lamented that “there is no marriage yet for human beings and animals”; he apparently left his £150M fortune to Choupette, his beloved cat.

Meanwhile the Artificial Intelligence community are starting to discuss whether sentient robots should also have human rights, own property and have moral responsibility – who is responsible when your self-driving car kills a pedestrian, or an auto-pilot brings down

an airliner? The place for human uniqueness seems to be getting smaller all the time, and arguably disappears altogether under the scrutiny of materialists who would claim that a person is only a specific arrangement of electrons, protons and neutrons – that everything we think of as human qualities are simply something that emerges when you mix up the right atoms in the right way – if that were the case we would have no moral responsibility at all.

We need to re-discover a Christian answer to “What does it mean to be human?” and so re-discover confidence in our faith.

We need to stand for example against the modern approach of reductionism. Reductionists might discover the main ingredients of a human being, but in doing so lose all sense of the qualities that define humanity. How inviting does this sound?

Ingredients: Sugar, Cocoa Mass, Cocoa Butter, Dried Skimmed Milk, Dried Whey (from Milk), Vegetable Fats (Palm, Shea), Milk Fat, Emulsifiers (Soya Lecithin, Sunflower Lecithin, E476), Orange Oil, Flavourings.

Yuk – not very appetising at all! But if I invited you to have a piece of Chocolate Orange – hmm that’s scrummy – would you be more inclined to say yes?

Under many modern philosophies humanity is losing its identity; it is being squeezed into an every narrowing gap – indeed in one modern film, human behaviour is described as unlike that of any other animal, and most closely resembles that of a virus. On this reckoning, “humans are a plague on planet earth”.

This is very like the erosion of belief in God, by squeezing Him into the gaps that remain after science has explained everything else. But as John Lennox put it this is a fundamental category error – “God is not

God of the gaps, He is God of the whole show.” In other words, it is only because of God’s sense of order that science can function at all. Similarly we are not humans of the gaps, but human nature is the standard by which all other behaviour is understood.

So what does the Bible say? It was written well before any of these modern ideas surfaced, and so it does not answer these questions directly. But it does set out an entirely alternative perspective. God’s perspective! Instead of reductionism it looks holistically at the place of humanity in cosmic history – and so give us meaning and purpose.

The Bible tells us that the unique and distinguishing quality of humans is that we are “Made in the Image of God.”

This is a truth that no reductionist approach could ever possibly discover. It is a revealed truth. The Bible also refuses to give a reductionist view of God – ‘put these ingredients together in the right arrangement and what you cook up is God.’ Instead it offers an invitation to “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Just as with the chocolate orange, only by experience of what God is like can we begin to understand what it means to have been made in His Image.

Unfortunately many modern philosophies begin with the premise that God does not exist, and so they will never get to taste and see that the Lord is good. But we do believe in God! Therefore by looking to God himself we can begin to rebuild an holistic picture of what it is to be human, to be made in His Image.

Genesis and John start with the creative word and go on to describe the bringer of life and light. This Word engages with the world but finds rejection, and yet was filled with grace and truth. Hebrews describes a liberator who through his own suffering sets people free; someone who so wholly identifies with our needs and failures that

he can intercede for us – someone therefore of great compassion. This is the God we meet in the Bible. To be truly human is to be made in this Image of God.

Humanity then is marked by light and life, love and compassion. Pre-eminently it is distinguished by the capacity to suffer for, with and alongside others, and so to bring them hope and freedom. This is the response of the community we have seen in Christchurch. This is humanity at its best. This is humanity that responds to the Image of God in which it is made. This then is the measure by which we need to ask the question “Is Jesus Human?” - and of course the answer is a resounding YES! He is quintessentially human.

Then Hebrews goes on to say “Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling...” And so we must go on to ask whether we too are fully human, or do we fall short of the Image of God in which we are made. Of course we fall short; we are after all only human. But a part of our humanity is to aspire to greater things, to step up to our calling – not to become gods, but to become Christ-like. Yes Jesus was fully human and he calls us to be fully human too.

He calls us to have lives marked by light and life, love and compassion. Lives filled with grace and truth. Lives marked out by our capacity to suffer for, with and alongside others, to bring them hope and set them free. Lives with arms stretched out to lovingly embrace ‘the other’ – the outcasts in society, and help them feel that they too belong. This is humanity at its best. This is humanity that knows and shows the Image of God in which we are made. This is the measure of what it means to be fully human. This is Christ’s call on our lives. This is what it means to be given “the right to become children of God.”

Amen