

Lectionary Scriptures
in message / liturgy:

Psalm 133
Mark 4: 35 – 41

2,755 words

Additional Scripture
references:

II Corinthians 5: 7
Matthew 3: 17
John 14: 8 – 11
Philippans 2: 6 – 8
Matthew 19: 26
Luke 1: 35
Matthew 16: 13 – 17
Matthew 9: 6
John 3: 16

Key songs:

Jesus Loves Me (contemp)
VU 563 Jesus, You Have Come to the Lakeshore
VU 344 How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds
MV 28 God of the Bible
VU 341 Fairest Lord Jesus

Additional music:

In The Likeness of You (Petra)
Lamb of God (Twila Paris)

Who Do You Say that I Am ?

Last week, we started this three week series on the Trinity by taking a look at the notion of God as Father. It was, after all, Father's Day, so it seemed like a good time to consider in what way our relationship with God is like the relationship between a child and their loving parent.

The nature of God is something that has confounded people for millennia, and has led to much discussion and a wide range of conclusions.

It's somewhat like the old adage that if you ask 3 people about something, you'll get 4 different opinions.

We did conclude, I think, last week that there were some mysteries that are better understood through the lens of faith. We read in II Corinthians that we “walk by faith, not by sight” and, perhaps, we require a little faith to aid in our understanding of that which we can’t truly understand.

That theme was echoed again in our Gospel lesson this morning, when Jesus said to his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”

Obviously, faith was expected.

Today we look at the relationship between Jesus and God, and between ourselves and Jesus, and between ourselves and Jesus as God, and... see, it’s getting complicated already.

How can Jesus be God’s son, and yet also be God?

We considered last week the parentage of Adam, and how we could consider God as Adam’s father, because God created Adam. But Adam wasn’t God, even though he was created by God.

We considered that Jesus was born of Mary, and so we knew who Jesus’ mother was, but that he had no human father. That certainly opens the door to God being Jesus’ father.

But that doesn’t make Jesus God, just the Son of God.

So how, then, can Jesus also be God?

In John 14:8, Philip asked of Jesus: “*Lord, show us the Father, and it suffices us.*”

Now, at that time, how did Jesus respond to Philip?

He said to Philip: *“Have I been so long time with you, and yet have you not known me, Philip? he that has seen me has seen the Father; and how say you then, Show us the Father? Believe you not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak to you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwells in me, he does the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake”*

Here, Jesus said very clearly, “he that has seen me has seen the Father.” and that, of course, implies that Jesus and the Father are one.

This is further confirmed in Matthew 3: 17 where, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Lord Jesus like a dove, a voice said: *“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased”*

So in Matthew’s Gospel, it is explicitly stated that Jesus is the Son of God.

In John’s Gospel, it is clearly stated that Jesus and the Father are one, and more specifically, one God.

How can that be?

The problem here is that we are trying to think in human terms. We know how it works with humans, and in fact with most species. We know about fathers and mothers, about pregnancy and childbirth. Nowadays, we even know about genes, chromosomes and DNA, and so we understand the mechanism of heredity that leads to a child being composed of parts of each of their parents, yet somehow their own creation.

In Philippians 2: 6 - 8 we read that Jesus Christ *‘though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And*

being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.'

Maybe Matthew 19: 26 applies: *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

Maybe we are trying to apply a human standard to God, who is most decidedly not human.

Or maybe God is human? God, in the form of Jesus, became human, or at least in human form. Because with God all things are possible.

Humans are curious, and strive to understand the world around us. We like to be masters of our domain, and be able to both understand and predict how things work. But we'd have to assume that God, who created the entire world and everything in it, as well as all life, can do some things that are beyond our understanding. We aren't the masters of all - God is - and that makes us uneasy. We don't like things we can't understand.

Maybe how isn't important. Maybe it's one of those mysteries we are supposed to understand only through a faith lens.

Maybe the "why" is more important than the "how."

The actual 'mechanics' of how God had a human son are not explained to us, but we are left in no doubt that Mary's conception and pregnancy are miraculous.

In Luke 1: 35 we read: *"The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'"*

The gospel of John, which is written in very symbolic language at the beginning, speaks about 'the word becoming flesh'. 'The word' is Jesus - who was with God in the beginning - and he became flesh - this is what 'incarnate' means - to be made flesh. This makes it clear that Jesus is the eternal God becoming human. So it isn't so much that God had a human son, but that God's son became human for our sake.

And that's what is important - not the how, but the why.

God's son, who is God, also became human for our sake.

In Matthew, chapter 16, we read:

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."

And so we see that Simon, called Peter (from the Greek "petra" meaning rock or stone) by Jesus, recognized Jesus for what he was. He didn't need to understand how.

Ben Conroy, a noted Catholic journalist and writer, writes:

Why exactly God became human is a question that can't be satisfactorily answered in a short article.

So what are the basic things that the Church says about the Incarnation? First, that it came about as a response to the bad state that our species was in.

Humanity had fallen away from God and original sin separated us from the relationship with the divine that we were created for. That separation damaged human nature itself, with the result that it couldn't be healed just by human power. In order to repair the damage and bring us back into proper relationship with God — to bring about our salvation — the next move would have to be made by God.

Conroy goes on to say:

Well, I say “have to be made” but this immediately raises one of the important things the Church says about the Incarnation: that God didn't have to make that next move. Humans are not cosmic creditors, collecting from God some debt owed: we wouldn't exist in the first place without Him, and the damage to our nature was done by humans. God's action was one of unbound love, not obligation.

What's possibly even more interesting is that, having decided to save humanity, God did not have to accomplish it via becoming a human. God is all-powerful: He could have brought about our salvation in a number of ways. The Incarnation, though, was judged by God to be the best or most fitting way to save us.

St Thomas Aquinas writes about two different ways that something can be ‘necessary’ in order to achieve some goal or ‘end’:

First, when the end cannot be without it; as food is necessary for the preservation of human life. Secondly, when the end is attained better and more conveniently, as a horse is necessary for a journey.

The Incarnation was only necessary for our salvation in the second sense — which makes it yet more of a gift. God chose not just to repair the damage of original sin, but to do so through an action that would have been the greatest of honours even had humanity never fallen: becoming one of us, living a human life alongside us.

This is why the fathers of the Church speak of Adam and Eve's fall as a 'felix culpa', a 'happy fault': God's response to it brought about something arguably greater than the situation that preceded it.

Pastor Mark Driscoll, an American evangelical pastor and author, says this: *Because Jesus is like us in that he was tempted, yet unlike us in that he never did sin, he can help us when we are tempted and show us how to escape sinful situations. Hebrews 2:17–18 says:*

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

In conclusion, Jesus alone can mediate between God and us because he alone is fully God and fully man and thereby able to perfectly represent both God and man.

Dr. Stephen Wellum, Professor of Christian Theology at Southern Seminary, says: *He's fully human. He knows what it means...you think of Luke 2, where he grows in wisdom, stature, favor with God and man, in terms of that human nature. He knows what it means to be in that human nature in a womb, to be born, to go through growth in life, to*

experience all that we experience—that is humbling. And then the apostle Paul will say, there's even a further humbling to death on a cross. And he's able to do that in and through his humanity. He can only die because he has a human nature. So Philippians 2 is very, very clear. He who is eternally God, adds to himself incarnation as addition, not subtraction. And this is born out in many other passages.

Why did the Son of God become human? Why did he take on our humanity?

Well, he did so for our salvation. And in the context of Hebrews 2, the author quotes Psalm 8 and then identifies Christ as "last Adam." So Christ, the Son of God becomes human in order to restore what Adam lost. He takes on our humanity, so that he's able to identify with us, and represent us, and be our substitute for us, in order to save us, and redeem us, and restore us. He does this to ultimately defeat all of the effects of sin and death. And that's described in Hebrews 2:14 and so on, as the defeat of our enemies—sin, and death, and the devil. And ultimately the reason is to reconcile us to God. It's that we stand as sinners before God; we stand under his judgment. We are guilty before him, and we need a Redeemer—we need God and one who is human—to justify us before God: to represent us, to identify with us, and to pay for our sin. I mean, those are the ultimate reasons for the incarnation, which then leads to a new heavens and new earth. So God's self-glorification in redemption of a people. And this is the only way that he can redeem us is through his incarnate Son and his entire work for us.

Wellum mentions Hebrews chapter 2, and if we look at verses 17 and 18, we read: 17 *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.* 18 *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

And there is the “why” – the Son of God, who was and is God, the Word made flesh, took on human nature as Jesus to atone for our sins, because he himself suffered when he was tempted, and therefore he is able to help us who are being constantly tempted.

So we may never understand the “what” – how exactly God became the Son of God, and yet as the human, Jesus, was still God. That’s the great mystery of the Incarnation.

(and if you think that mystery is a tough nut to crack, wait until next week when we finish our look at the Trinity by considering the Spirit!)

But we can certainly appreciate the “why” – because, as humans, we are always trying to be compassionate and understanding, because we know that when we put ourselves in somebody else’s shoes, we can understand them better, and are in a better position to help them.

As humans, we acknowledge our frailties, but we strive to overcome them.

There are, however, some things we can’t overcome on our own. In fact, most difficulties we need to overcome require some assistance from somebody.

We don’t give others enough credit. We like to think we are self-sufficient, when in reality, everything that we have is something that somebody else had a hand in.

Whether that was a parent, or a colleague, or a friend, or even God – we are more than the sum of our parts, precisely because we are, in fact, the sum of everyone who has ever helped us. Without that help, where would we be?

Who do you say that I am?

We say that you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

And, although we rely on our faith to understand how that came to be, if we truly look at ourselves, our lives and our situations, we can understand why we need the Son of the Living God.

Last week, we took a good look at the Lord's Prayer, and how it covered all those things that we need.

Lead us not into temptation – because the Son of the Living God understands temptation, He can help us in our desire to avoid it, if we earnestly ask for that help. Deliver us from Evil – the Son of the Living God, being the omniscient God, knows and understands evil, and has the power to deliver us from evil.

Forgive us our sins – Matthew 9: 6 tells us that the Son of Man has the power to forgive sins.

So, when we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, we can ask God for all those things in the prayer – but when we pray it knowing that Jesus is the Word made flesh, and is truly God Incarnate, we know that because Jesus understood what it is to be human, it is in that framework that our prayers will be heard and granted.

We know that Jesus is God, and we also know Jesus as a human, with human limitations and frailties, who died on a cross not because of his sins, but because of ours.

We marvel at the mysteries, but we are secure in the knowledge that God's love and grace are unconditional.

The promise of John 3: 16 is this: *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

We don't need to know how. We don't need to understand the mystery. That's why it is a mystery. We only need to believe, and then we are rewarded with the eternal life God promised to us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.