

PENTECOST XV – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Have you ever struggled with what to make of Jesus? How to understand him? I did, for a long time. First of all, it was because so much of Christian scripture and so many denominations within the Christian Church not only described Jesus as sinless, which St. Paul says, they also talked about him as if he never had any feelings, any temptations, any doubts—all of those are parts of what it is to be human. My question, then: how could Jesus be truly human?

I get the divine part. That's the part atheists and agnostics struggle with, and I can respect them and their struggle, for where else in world history and literature do we encounter a human who is not just divine like some Greek heroes, but part of the very Being of God, or as some of our ancient creeds say, "co-equal and co-eternal." The Church, to my mind, has made a pretty good case for that. We need to consider that those healings and other miracles were and are not only possible; we have to accept them as real in some way. They made a powerful difference in people's lives. And when it comes to healing, we don't have to believe that Jesus did all that on his own. Jesus gave us the clue in what he so often said to those people: "Your faith has made you well." Or perhaps it was the parent's faith, as in our gospel passage for today, or perhaps it was the faith of the four friends who carried that very sick man to Jesus on his own bed. It was always about faith. Jesus instilled that faith through his presence and teaching, and when they came to him believing they would find help, they did.

Matthew writes one of the most chilling sentences in his gospel: "And Jesus could do no healing in that town because of the lack of faith

there.” God forbid! that that might ever be said about us, about this Christian community of St. Matthias. God forbid that we should be so narrow, so hopeless, so skeptical that our lack of faith might diminish or destroy the hope of any and everyone among us.

We can look at those in our country and beyond who want to take violence in their own hands in order to gain power to change society and control everyone else. That reveals a complete lack of faith that this is God’s world and that all of us working together WITH GOD can make this a better world to live in. That wish to seize power is a major dynamic of our time in the history of the world, and across the breadth of nations, and it is a great danger to humanity. We need to find ways to stand up against that lust for power and to stand for the reign of God, but that’s not what I come here to say today. I come to share ways we can see Jesus for who he fully is and to believe in him, to trust in him, and in so doing, to let God grow our own faith.

Personally, I cannot believe that Jesus can be my savior if he is not fully human. If he’s not human, how does he know what to save me from? There’s a two-word verse in John’s gospel that helps me with that: “Jesus wept.” Yes, Jesus cried. Jesus was stricken with grief at the loss to him and his family when Lazarus entered the realm of death. Jesus felt the loss, he felt diminishment, he felt a great big hole in his heart where one moment Lazarus was alive and filling his life with camaraderie, joy, trust, and the sharing of all those things that bond us in friendship, all those many things that are part of love, that help to grow us spiritually into healthy human beings. Jesus wept. He felt the fear of never sharing the wonder of that love again to that great degree with another human being. Jesus had a profound experience of the loneliness that comes to us who are left behind in the moment of the death of a loved one and for a great deal of time thereafter. In that I both see and feel the depth of the humanity of Jesus. He suffered.

Jesus suffered not just in front of his torturers as they whipped him and spat on him and mocked him on that Friday we call “good,” and not just wracked with pain as he hung in the hot, burning sun and died on the cross. He suffered a simple, a common, a universal pain that anyone who has loved another experiences in life. There I can see Jesus’ humanity. He is not above it all, merely pitying or sympathizing with us in our loss, our pain. Jesus knew it, too. He knew it deeply, enough so that the tears flowed, and people said, “See how much he loved him.” That’s one way we see Jesus’ humanity.

What about temptations? Was Jesus so much a part of the Godhead, the very being of God, that he never had any temptations? Oh, I don’t mean those temptations in the wilderness which may have been exactly as described, but which are highly symbolic as well as physical—the temptations that come from hunger, a lust for power or control or domination, a longing for adulation and a show of favoritism from God. All of those temptations were revisited on Jesus during his ministry on this earth in the three years before his death, up to the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when he walked up the Temple steps as people cried out their Hosannas and wanted to make him king. That’s the third temptation all over again. Jesus looked at the crowd, turned and walked away from the Temple, walked away from that moment and that adulation, to what would become, in a week’s time, his ignominious death. Can you imagine the temptation to be able to wield enough power to heal everyone from illness or pain, to heal every broken relationship, to be the pastor that saves us all from suffering? Yet Jesus said “no” to that, fully aware that we humans can never become fully alive unless we suffer and grow from our suffering. No one, not even Jesus, can do that for us. Here is the way we see Jesus dealing with real temptation—he encounters the temptations that

beset each and all of us, and then the temptations that were particular to him alone.

What about doubt? I would add to doubt the word “uncertainty” or a lack of clarity. What did Jesus know and what did he not know, especially about his own call, his own mission. Today’s gospel passage is so powerful here. Think of it: here is a woman (at best a second-class human being in that culture), and not only a woman, but a foreigner of a different faith-perspective (a Syrophenician Gentile), which drops her value to a Jew even more. Yet in her grasping at straws to find healing for her little daughter, the woman approaches Jesus. His words to her are terribly demeaning, some of the most unkind things he ever says to another person, about like using the N-word to address her: “I have come for the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She and her daughter are dogs. Dogs! Less than human. Some say Jesus was testing her, and maybe he was. But I think she was testing him. She was desperate to get through to the part of him that might want to help her, and what she said to him was brilliant: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She is saying, “I will take what I get and be content with it. Whatever you give me will be enough!”

Jesus is overwhelmed by her faith. In that moment, Jesus realizes she has more faith than most of the people he has been trying to reach with his preaching any and every day. In that moment, Jesus realizes that his mission and ministry is not limited to some group of Jewish backsliders, those who only practice religion in public on high holy days rather than every day. Jesus sees that his ministry is to those who will listen! Wow! We see Jesus learning something. He was not yet fully formed; Jesus was still growing in his faith, in his relationship with God, in his relationship with all of humanity. How like us! And he learns it all

from his relationship with a person whom his culture warned him to ignore, to write off, to dismiss entirely! How like us Jesus is in that moment, needing to learn how much more there is to his life, his witness and mission!

For my sake, and perhaps for yours, I thank God for this story which shows us not only what God was doing *through* Jesus, but also what God was doing *in* Jesus, what God was doing *for* Jesus. For Jesus, this encounter is every bit as important as the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration shows Jesus how much God loves Jesus. This encounter shows Jesus how broadly and universally God *shares with Jesus*—shares the whole mission on earth, EVERYTHING!

Only one of the early heresies about Jesus was about diminishing his divinity, the true nature Jesus shares with God. All of the rest—ALL OF THEM—in some way diminish Jesus' humanity, the true nature he shares with us, and, more than that, the fullness of what it is to be human which he lives out for us in his earthly life. All of these heresies make him seem at least a little more divine than human.

What then can we learn from Jesus about being human and about being fully alive? To be human is to experience our feelings and know how they contribute to our lives. To be human is to be tempted to be other than we are created to be, whether that is to undervalue or aggrandize ourselves, and then find a way to come center, to come home again to who we truly are. To be human is to doubt, and then to seek not certainty, but clarity and courage.

May we be as fully human as Jesus and accept God's grace and forgiveness when we are less than that. *Amen.*

+JLJ

