

Hilary 1 Evensong, Jesus College Oxford

Sunday 16th January 2011

Isaiah 11.1-10; Luke 2.41-52

The Humanity of Jesus Christ

In nomine...

The philosophy tutor settled into his chair, papers scattered around him, books in creative disarray, and surrounded by lighting that would not fit in with our Home Bursar's Feng Shui, and proceeded to give a very good impression of going to sleep while listening to the essay. It was a typical tute. The essay turned into discussion, the chiming of the Oxford bells was heard drifting in through the drafty window, an occasional squawk rose up from the unruly students in the quad below. All was normal, that is, until the don suddenly leapt up. Had a student stumbled across an innovative philosophical truth? Had one of them said something disastrously mistaken? Worst of all - had they just unwittingly undermined the whole of the paper he was presently writing...?

No.

'Oh no!' he announced. 'I've got to go!' Fumble, fumble, for his keys. 'I've left my children in Tesco's on the Cowley Road!'

I never did hear the outcome, so I presume his children were found safe, and his wife didn't throttle him.

It was probably not too different from the conversation between Mary and Joseph in today's second reading. 'But I thought he was with you!' 'But I thought he was with you!' 'Where did you last see him?' 'Has anyone seen him?' 'What have you done?' 'It's not my fault...' All too human a domestic, we can imagine.

It was the thing that all Jewish families did: if they lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem, they went to the city every year for the Passover. A big group of them, travelling together. And the Jewish coming-of-age for a man was 12 years. Jesus has just grown up, as it were. But not so much that his parents are not still responsible for him. Today Mary would have been reported to the Child Protection Agency. Really.

There is Jesus, on the brink of becoming a teenager – sitting calmly with the rabbis in the temple. Another domestic scene. Mary to Jesus: ‘Why have you done this to us? We’ve been tearing our hair out looking for you!’ Relief, frustration – a whole load of emotions mingled together. A normal family. Full of humanity.

But that’s the interesting point. Jesus’ calm response is ‘But why were you so worried? Didn’t you know I would be in my Father’s house?’ He makes the distinction between his earthly father Joseph, and his heavenly father God.

One of the questions we often discuss in Theologians Anonymous is how Jesus could be both fully human and truly divine at the same time. Questions like: Did he know he was the Son of God?

This story of Luke’s tells us that Jesus *did* – by this stage – know that he was the Son of God. Christian theology argues that he knew this precisely *because* he was truly human. He was learning about who he was, who his family was, and who God was. Through his childhood, he learnt to say ‘Father’. He knew the language of relationships, of families. He was human.

We are human, we should be humane. We ought to perceive the humanity in others. To recognise that we all share the same human struggles. To realise there are deep human bonds, despite differences of background, gender, politics, faith, race. To understand that we all can honour each other’s humanity.

It’s only too easy to think humanity is about excuses. ‘We’re only human’. We use it to explain away mistakes. But actually to be truly human, is to engage fully in who we are and what we are here for. Or, turn that around: To be Christlike, is to be fully human.

Mary and Joseph, Jesus' earthly parents, were the first people to teach the child Jesus his humanity. As a youth, he learnt the language of humanity from his teachers in the Temple. As an adult, he would learn about humanity from everyone he mixed with. Learning is a human thing. At the same time Jesus learnt about his humanity, he was also learning his identity as Son of God. We cannot separate the perfect humanity of Jesus Christ from his true divinity. And for us to strive to be Christlike is to strive to be as fully human as we can be.

It's dangerous to quote someone when they are in fact quite close to you – particularly when it's your husband you're talking about – but I think here it's worthwhile. In a sermon he preached to celebrate the ordination of a colleague once, he said:

You are called *first* to be *human*; *second*, to be *Christian*, and *third*, to be a *priest*.

It's important that we learn about what defines us as individuals; but more basic even than that is learning that we are human. What must come first is our humanity. And that's why we can celebrate Jesus's humanity as we do. For at Christmas, he's there, plain for all to see, to touch, to hear: a baby. Next, the Church season of Epiphany celebrates his *manifestation* – you Classicists will figure that's what the Greek means – as the Magi's gifts mark him out as *mortal*, as well as king, and as priest.

Easy as it sounds, being fully human is not quite as straightforward as we might hope. It's not about shrugging and letting our humanity be an excuse for weakness. Rather, it's about letting our weakness be our strength. Working with our human limitations. Letting our honest human struggles bring us close to the divine.

We most often see people share their humanity in a crisis: the thirteen year-old boy in the floods in Queensland who, despite his own fear of water, asked for his ten-year-old brother to be saved first, and consequently lost his own life. Or the wounded helping one another, as we hear from the July 7th bombing inquest. It's not just 'crisis' humanity, but everyday humanity as well.

In Coventry there was an accordion player who sat outside our house. Spoke little English, trying to support an enormous brood of children with her music. Well, I say 'music'.

Unfortunately for us and all our neighbours, she only knew five notes. And those five notes only in one order. I was reminded of her by a friend.

‘She’s still there. And hasn’t learnt any new notes. I wanted to scream just now when I heard her. But then she wished me a good day, with that toothless smile of hers, and I couldn’t do other than smile back, and wish her one, too’, he conceded. Humanity: on our doorstep, knowing we share something deeper than our own personal interests.

So humanity: first, about the everyday. And second, about not being *superhuman*. We are finite. Even Jesus had limited energy, resources. We have to set our boundaries right: Our boundaries for doing enough work, for doing enough with and for other people, for taking enough time for ourselves. Knowing our weaknesses, and letting them shape our lives, as we in turn are sensitive to the fragility of those around us. Then we can pat ourselves on the back and enjoy reaching our realistic targets.

And third, humanity is about sharing others’ human joys, *despite* ourselves. Being lifted out of our own worries when we hear of the birth of a friend’s baby. Delighting in someone else’s success in Collections when we’ve not done as well as we might have wanted. Encouraging one another, challenging one another, laughing with one another, relaxing with one another. Helping one another to be human. We’re all in the same boat.

Jesus learnt and practised his humanity with his family, and with his teachers. What about us? Jesus College is like a family, and we are surrounded by teachers. A place to learn, to practise, our common humanity in our common rooms.

To be the family of Jesus College, we need to be human. That means respecting the humanity of all – from the smallest child of one of the staff, to the most distinguished Fellow; from the newest Fresher, to the longest-standing Graduate.

To put it more simply: to be Christian, is to man up.

After all, Jesus did...