

Who is Jesus? Jesus' Divinity

Scripture

We are looking at the person of Jesus for these next few weeks. Last week we looked at Jesus' humanity and this week we will be looking at his divinity.

Our reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew writes, primarily, to those who are a part of the Jewish faith – these are God's 'people' – the 'children of Abraham'. We know that Matthew is writing to this group of people by the ways in which he uses insider language. Insider language is the use of words and references which those who are a part of the group – the organization – the business – the club – the culture – the religious group – would be familiar with.

We use insider language all the time – we as Christian people talk about God's 'grace' or 'righteousness' – we talk about how Jesus' life, death and resurrection is redeeming – we talk about the Holy Spirit (I am not to sure what we say about the Spirit ☺). We refer to scripture – to confessions and creeds – we worship in certain ways – all these are things that make no sense to those who are not a part of the Christian club – and the part of that club that calls itself Presbyterian.

You see what I mean. Matthew does the same thing – he writes to these people who are culturally and religiously Jewish and he makes references – over and over again – to scriptures,

to prophets – to a religious system – which they know. Matthew writes to them in order to both tell them the story of Jesus and to convince them that this Jesus is from God (a prophet, a Rabbi, the Messiah) and that this Jesus is the Son of God – God himself.

The choice of our texts for today might be a little surprising to you. We associate them more with the Christmas readings or the readings we hear right after the New Year when we are pointed to Jesus' baptism than texts that we would read in late February.

The first reading is a birth narrative – told by Matthew from Joseph's perspective. Here we hear three different names or titles for Jesus – 'Messiah' – 'Jesus' – and 'Emmanuel' – all that give us some indication about who Jesus is.

The second reading recalls Jesus' baptism. Here we hear a voice from heaven calling out, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This too gives us some idea about who Jesus is.

One more thing that we should note this morning as we hear these scripture readings and that is the active presence of the Holy Spirit – or the Spirit of God – is there throughout.

Prayer

Introduction

We are talking about Jesus – who he is and what that means to us – here – today – now. We are talking about the Jesus – who the church – the church that is broad and wide – the church that is catholic – that is to say universal and includes all who believe in Jesus – has for some 2000 years said and defended as being – fully human and fully divine.

I have to confess my own confusion when it comes to understanding Jesus – his humanity and his divinity. I mean that I know this intellectually – we say that Jesus is fully human and fully divine – but when it comes down practically – I always seem to wind up with this kind of mixture of the two – a Jesus who is part human – part divine – a Jesus who is super human – and when I look top down – a poor excuse for a God.

I have to wonder if Matthew himself is a little confused as he tries to tell us about Jesus – I mean he begins his gospel by telling us that he is going to give us “An account of the genealogy (genesis) of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Then he gives this accounting starting with Abraham going all the way to Joseph – the Joseph that we read about in our reading today – And then he tells us that Joseph is not the father of Jesus!

He repeatedly in these first few chapters of his gospel – tells us that Jesus is the Messiah – which at first glance – is to say that Jesus is the anointed one of God – that Jesus is a prophet, a priest, a king – anointed by God – to serve in that way.

But in these days – the days of those that first hear Matthew’s gospel and even today – the word Messiah is loaded with political implications – with the expectations of a deliverer king – who God would send to save God’s people – to liberate and redeem (give

them meaning). These implications carry over to today – where we have an eschatological hope – of Jesus coming again to redeem all of creation.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is the '*Messiah*' – he says to us in chapter 2 that Jesus is the Messiah which means the '*King of the Jews*' – he tells us that 'Jesus' is the one who will '*save us from our sins*' – he tells us that Jesus is '*Emmanuel*' '*God is with us.*' He tells us that Jesus is the '*beloved Son*' – and in chapter 4 he has the tempter – the devil – saying to Jesus – if you are the *Son of God*....

Matthew in using all these titles – gives us all these hints of Jesus' divinity – but at the same time – Matthew is telling us that Jesus was born of Mary. Matthew tells us that Jesus was picked up by his parents and they fled to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. Matthew tells us that Jesus was baptized by John – John who was baptizing with water for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew tells us that Jesus goes out to the wilderness where he fasted for forty days and forty nights – and that he is famished.

It seems that Matthew is just as confused as we are about how to hold this tension between the Jesus who is both fully human and fully divine. (It is good to know that we are in good company here.) Today I want us to look at the divinity of Jesus.

What does it mean to be divine?

Let's start where we started last week – only instead of asking the question of what does it mean to be human – we need to ask the question what it means to be divine. I asked this question in Bible Study on Wednesday and those there said well that was a little harder to answer than the human question because well we aren't divine.

So in order to help us out a little bit this morning I went to the Westminster Larger Catechism. Catechisms are statements of faith put in a question and answer format. The question reflects a question any of us might ask and the answer reflects a synopsis of what scripture tells us in response to our question.

Question 7 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* ask 'What is God?' – (This sounds like the question we are asking.) The answer begins by telling us that *God is Spirit* (in other words not human or in human form). It goes on to say that God is '*in and of himself*' (not dependant on any other one or thing) '*infinite in being*' (without beginning or end) *unlimited or not contained in glory, blessedness, perfection.*

It tells us that God is "*all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and in truth.*"

In other words God is sooooo much more than us. While we are vulnerable and needy – God is not. While we are fragile and frail – God is not. Where we are limited in knowledge and ability – wisdom and power – mercy and grace – patience and persistence – God is not. While we are

arbitrary and vindictive – while truth is allusive for us – always watered down by our experiences and situations – In is not so for God. While we are mortal – God is not.

What does it mean for Jesus to be divine?

If we say – and we do – that Jesus is fully human and fully divine – what does it mean for Jesus to be divine?

Well, for one thing it means that Jesus is *eternal* – that he pre-existed and post exist his earthly existence. He was before – he was – and he is after he was. (☺) John in writing his gospel addresses those who question Jesus' divinity. He writes that,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ... He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. (Jesus' identity as the Word, the true Light come to overcome darkness.) ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth....

(Jn 1:1-2,10,14)

John writing again in Revelations paints for us the picture of Jesus sitting as the righteous judge as the kingdom of God explodes in its fullness over all of creation. He gives Jesus the name of King of Kings and Lord of Lord. He shows us of the birth of a new heaven and a new earth – born out of Christ's reconciling and redeeming work. He tells us that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end.

For Jesus to be divine – would mean that Jesus would have *power / authority* (the exercising of power). Again I am thankful for John here in helping me to see the power of the divine Jesus. John, again in the beginning of his gospel, tells us that ‘all things came into being through him (him the eternal Word – Jesus), and without him not one thing came into being.’ (Jn 1:3)

John helps me to see in Revelations the power/authority of the divine Jesus – who judges in righteousness and executes his righteous judgment by sending legions of angels to bring about justice.

Jesus divine power/authority – how they expresses themselves in the midst of his earthly ministry is one of those areas that confuses me. We see Jesus as one who teaches with authority. We see Jesus doing things (like forgiving sin) and hear the questioning accusation of the religious leaders saying, ‘Who does he think he is? Only God can forgive sins.’

Jesus performs miracles (the healing of the sick, the driving out of demons, the turning of water into wine, the feeding of the 4000 and the 5000, the stilling of the sea, and the rising of the dead) and we attribute those things to Jesus’ divine power. Is Jesus then really only divine?

At other times there are those who demand of him that he use his power to prove his identity (the temptation in the wilderness ‘if you are the Son of God’ and there on the cross ‘if he is the Son of God’) and here he seems to be impotent. Is Jesus then truly divine?

Many of the types of miracles that Jesus perform can be found in other places of scripture – the healings, the miraculous acts of nature, the unexplained feedings that come from unexplainable sources, the healing of the sick, and even the raising of the dead – those appear in other places – always in connection with one of God’s anointed. Which reminds me that it is the power of God at work – not in the divinity of the person – but in the connectedness of that person to God.

I think this is why it is why Matthew, over and over, tells us about the presence of the Holy Spirit – with and in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of Life – the Holy Spirit is power of God actively at work. And the power of God at work in and through Jesus.

Lastly and quickly – for Jesus to be divine means that there is an *infinite abundance of wisdom and of what we might call an integrity of moral character*. Jesus is the absolute when we think about things like righteousness (acting rightly and justly always), in holiness (or purity), in mercy, in grace, and in love. There is a purity of character – the definition of these things – are found Jesus.

What is at stake for us here?

If Jesus isn’t divine – then we – you and I – are guilty of idolatry. It is a point well made by the 4th Century Theologian Athanasius – “...if Jesus were a creature created (like us), then Christians were guilty of worshipping a creature instead of God—in other words, they have lapsed into idolatry.” (Alister McGrath, Christian Theology an Introduction, p. 335)

If Jesus isn't divine – then all we know about God – about who God is and how God acts – about the extent of God's love – and grace – and mercy – it is all subjective – it is only our best hopes mixed with our imagination – seasoned with a bit of natural revelation. In Jesus – God is fully revealed to us – so that we might know...

If Jesus isn't divine – then God didn't really give up something important – precious – valuable – in Jesus' human life and death. God's love is not self-giving.

If Jesus isn't divine – then Jesus' can't forgive sins – he can't save us – he can't redeem us – he can't offer us life that is eternal. There is no power – there is no authority – no power or authority other than the power and authority that we have – that is given to us as human beings – the kind of power and authority that is limited and fleeting.

What is at stake here is the very foundation of our faith and belief – that in Jesus Christ – God came to dwell with us – Emmanuel. That Jesus is the one who will save us from our sin. That the anointed one of God – the Messiah – has come to lead us into a new reality and will finish the work that he has begun. Amen.