

January 6, 2008

Luke (#4) The Mystery of Christ – Joining Deity to Humanity Without Diminishing Either
Hebrews 4:1-16 / Luke 2:1-40

It's hard for some people to hear a message on the Christmas text after Christmas and New Years have passed! I know that. Jumping out of sequence with the calendar year can sometimes cause a message to lose a bit of its impact.

Yet as one Episcopalian friend used to say to me — *“We Episcopalians have no problem preaching about Christmas after Christmas, because in our tradition we remember that the 12 days of Christmas, or the celebration of Christ's birth starts Christmas Day and goes clear through to January 6 or Three Kings Day.”*

It's true. For many evangelicals the celebration of Christmas ends when Christmas Day ends, but for a good number of people world wide it begins on Christmas Eve and doesn't end till January 6!

And when you think about it, a 12 day celebration of the Christmas Miracle is probably more appropriate — especially when one considers the phenomenal nature of that miracle, and all it has to say to us and offer to us in regard to our faith and life.

So, even though Christmas was nearly 2 weeks ago, today is the 12th day of Christmas or Three Kings Day (when most of the Christian world outside the United States celebrates the arrival of the Magi to worship the Christ Child — giving their gifts to one another today in commemoration of the Magi giving their gifts to Jesus) and thus being the last day of Christmas, I've decided to slip in one last message on the Christmas text!

Actually, the text I'm speaking from today takes us from Jesus birth to His dedication and circumcision at the Temple 8 days later, and puts us just 4 days after the sequence of these events in His life!

So, with all that in mind, let's continue to focus this one last time on the miracle of Christmas — a miracle so astounding that the people of Jesus day, like us today, struggle to grasp all the implications and understand all things it has to tell us about Jesus.

In fact, what I'd like to do today is to use this text to clear up one of the major difficulties most all people have in relation to the incarnation before we get into the rest of Luke's Gospel.

It's a difficulty, which if left unresolved, will inevitably warp our perception of Jesus / rob the gospel of its redemptive power / and diminish the comfort and transformational effect it is intended to have on our lives.

You see, the incarnation of Jesus is a MIRACLE and MYSTERY of such phenomenal proportions, that people from every age and every place have habitually struggled not deviating into error in regard to their understanding of Jesus.

What error? The error of so emphasizing Jesus DEITY that they diminish His very real, complete and full humanity, or, on the other hand, so emphasizing His very real HUMANITY that they diminish His complete, unadulterated and full Deity.

Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Conservative or Fundamental churches have habitually fallen prey to the first error, and thus struggle when it comes to affirming His real, complete and full humanity. And liberal, or unorthodox churches have habitually fallen prey to the second error, diminishing or denying Christ's very real, complete and full Deity.

In fact, as I believe I mentioned last year, one pastor at my home church in Norfolk, Massachusetts (a United Church of Christ / American Baptist merger) boldly declared that he believed that Jesus was the product of an affair between Mary and a Roman soldier (the same belief, by the way, which Adolf Hitler also espoused). Others (less boldly) say Joseph or someone else was the father.

But either way the result is the same — they diminish or deny the Deity of Christ / do away with the virgin birth / remove it from the sphere of the miraculous / deny that the pre-existent, eternal Word or Son became incarnate in Jesus / and thus effectively do away with the extreme difficulty of holding the dual nature of Jesus in tension.

For them the only MYSTERY is the mystery of trying to figure out who the earthly father of Jesus might have been!

In fact, some would say the only difference between us and Jesus is that upon Jesus "God poured out the Spirit without measure or without limit" (John 3:34), whereas upon us He pours it out in a limited fashion (the "firstfruits of the Spirit."). Jesus (according to them) was not Deity enfleshed in human form, but simply a man whom God filled and equipped and anointed with an extra portion of His Holy Spirit.

THAT (or some modification of it) is the error of many liberal groups. They do away with the profound and terribly difficult mystery of the incarnation by doing away with Jesus' Deity — a message preached subtly, or overtly, by Unitarians, unorthodox groups, or many in main line denominations.

Yet they are NOT the only ones to err in regard to the dual nature of Jesus. The opposite error is equally common and equally dangerous. (In fact, it is actually attacked more by the authors of Scripture than the opposite error!)

It's the error that many Evangelical, Catholic, Conservative, Fundamental or Orthodox Christians fall into — the error of so stressing and affirming Christ's DEITY that they diminish or do away with His full, complete and very real HUMANITY.

It's an error or a heresy that theologians down through the ages have called "docetism," from the Greek word "dokeo" which means "to seem or to appear." A view that believes or teaches that Jesus only "seemed" or "appeared" to be in every way truly human, when in actuality He was not. He simply looked human, pretended to be human, or merely possessed a human body (like a spiritual entity that invades or takes over a person's body but is really separate from it).

Yet the "mystery" that Christmas forces upon us and asks us to simply accept in faith (the mystery it asks us to believe and proclaim) is that the infant who was born on Christmas Day / and circumcised on the eighth day / and worshipped by the wise men / and grew in wisdom and stature growing in favor with both God and man / was BOTH fully DIVINE and fully HUMAN at the very same time. Not one or the other!

He was not simply the "ideal man" of liberal Christianity, nor was He the divine demigod of much conservative Christianity. He was not more God than man, or more man than God, but a fully and undiminished both at the very same time! His humanity simply being enhanced and perfected by His Deity.

He was NOT so divine He couldn't be human. He was so perfectly human and so flawlessly displayed the image of God that He had to be divine!

And let me tell you (if you haven't already guessed!): THAT is hard to comprehend! So hard to comprehend and keep in balance (or hold in tension), that people tend to take the easier path (intellectually) — of going to one of the two extremes I've mentioned.

The extreme positions being easier to hold to because they relieve the mental tension that comes from trying to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in perfect balance!

Yet as J. I. Packer rightly notes in the New Bible Dictionary: *“The New Testament (treats) any denial that Jesus Christ was both truly divine and truly human as a damning heresy, destructive to the gospel.”*

Thus I say to all of you: Hard as it is (and it is hard!) we must avoid the very real and habitual tendency to negate or diminish either one of those truths by elevating one OVER the other, or one to the EXCLUSION of the other.

To say Jesus is **GOD** is to affirm what the Bible says in Matthew 1:23; John 1:1-14; John 10:30; John 20:28; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:1-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:3, etc., etc., etc.

And to say that Jesus was a **MAN** is also to affirm what the Bible says in all the Gospels, I Cor. 15:21 and 47; I Tim. 2:5; Hebrews 5:7; I Jn. 4:1-6; I Jn. 5:5-12; and II Jn. 7-9ff.

Scripture declares that **BOTH** statements are equally true! Yet it's so hard to hold them in the perfect balance we see in Scripture, that most people fail, or at least fail on occasion, to do so. I know I have.

But the problem is this: When we fail to do so, as I mentioned before, it will inevitably warp our perception of Jesus / rob the gospel of its redemptive power / and diminish the comfort and transformational effect such truth is intended to have in the life of the believer.

So let me use the time remaining to share some things we need to note in regard to Jesus. And because we as a church fall into the more “conservative camp” theologically (and would thus tend to err on the side of so stressing Christ's Deity that we diminish His very real and complete humanity) let me seek to pull us back in the direction of affirming the truth **WE** might tend to water down — the truth that Jesus was as completely human as we are, yet more.

When I pastored in New England (where the predominant theological climate is extremely liberal and even unbelieving), I did just the opposite --- I continually stressed the fact of Christ's Deity — because that was the error they were more susceptible to. If anything the opposite would be true here in the Bible belt of Pennsylvania.

So, what does this Christmas text tell us about Jesus? **FIRST** is tells us that apart from His conception, Jesus developed in every way just like any other human baby, because He was fully human. He grew in Mary's womb from an egg, to a fetus with fingers and toes and eyes and ears, developing into a full term baby with an umbilical cord attached to His navel that had to be cut when Joseph or some Jewish midwife helped deliver Him on Christmas Day!

And as He lay in the manger on that day, with His tiny fingers possibly clenching a piece of hay, or holding on to the swaddling cloths that Mary had wrapped Him in, He was NOT thinking to Himself — *'Wow, here I am, the ruler of the universe staring up from this manger at some of the creatures I made!'*

Not at all! In His humanity He was a baby just like any other baby. He did not fake babyhood! He did not have an omniscient mind while He lay in the manger only minutes after His birth!

As R. Kent Hughes rightly points out, Jesus *"did not say to Himself, 'You all think I am a pre-articulate baby discovering I have a hand. Actually, I am God admiring my brilliant invention. I am your Creator, and I understand every word you are saying.'"* *"Not at all! This was not a post-natal spoof. He was not pretending. He was a baby!"*

"The great historic doctrine of the church," he says, *"is that the Son of God became a real man — not just someone who appeared to be a man. When He was born, God the Son placed the exercise of His all-powerfulness and all-presence and all-knowingness under the discretion of God the Father. He did not give up those attributes, but submitted their exercise in His life to the Father's discretion. Though He was sinless, He had a real human body, mind, and emotions — complete with their inherent weaknesses."* (Weaknesses which included the need to eat, sleep, and rest; be subject to pain and disappointment; wrestle with temptation and die.)

Paul says the same thing this way in Philippians 2:5-7 where he writes:

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (literally "robbed booty" that one covetously clings to), but made Himself nothing ("ekenosen" in the Greek — "He stripped Himself," or "emptied Himself") taking on the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness." That is, "just like us in every way, except sin."

If you don't understand that you don't understand the incarnation. Because the Eternal Spirit of Jesus didn't just come to live inside a human body like a spirit that simply possesses, animates or uses a human body, but remains a separate entity from it.

Stories of "the gods" possessing human bodies abound in ancient religions! But that's not what Christianity teaches! The Gospel is unique! There is nothing like it! It is totally different from every other concept or account! For as John tells us in chap. 1:1-14 ***"The Word (who was with God and was God) BECAME FLESH and dwelt among us full of grace and truth."***

He didn't just come and indwell a human body, like a demon that enters, possesses and leaves a body when it's cast out. No! The Word (we are told) actually "became flesh!" He became a flesh and blood human being with human chromosomes and human DNA and human emotions and feelings and appetites and desires and limitations – just like us.

"The incarnation of the Son of God," says J. I. Packer, ***"was not a diminishing of deity, but an acquiring of manhood. It was not that God the Son came to indwell a human being as the Spirit was later to do [at Pentecost]. To equate incarnation to indwelling is the essence of the Nestorian heresy. It was rather that the Son in person began to live a fully human life. He did not simply clothe Himself in a human body, taking the place of the soul, as Apollinarus maintained, He took to Himself a human soul as well as a human body. That is, He entered into the experience of human psychological life as well as human physical life. His manhood was complete; He became "the man Christ Jesus."*** (I Tim. 2:5) A man made like us in every way except sin.

I can't stress that enough. Jesus was more than just a man, because He was also divine. But hear me well: In His incarnation He was never less than a man (except in the fact of His sinlessness).

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. Being fully human, Jesus felt everything we as humans feel and struggled with everything we as human beings struggle with. In fact, one of the first pains Jesus felt (apart from the pains of being squeezed through the birth canal, or getting slapped on the behind by Joseph or the Jewish midwife to make sure he was ok, or feeling the pangs of hunger that every baby feels) was the pain Jewish babies in particular felt on the eighth day when they were brought to the Temple to be circumcised, and the priest took his knife (in a day before they had nova cane) and cut away the skin in circumcision. You can be sure that on that occasion, ***"The Little Lord Jesus MUCH crying He made!"***

The moment we say He didn't we dehumanize Him or make Him a divine actor, aloof and distanced from our human condition, rather than one who was actually tempted by the same things we are tempted by / wrestled with what we wrestle with / feeling the hurt of betrayal / the sting of rejection / and the horrible physical pain of being abused, beaten and crucified.

To look at what He went through and simply say, "Yeah, but He was God," or that "Being God He was kept from really feeling, experiencing, or struggling with all those things" is to have fallen prey to the error of allowing His deity to diminish His humanity and deny the clear teaching of Scripture. That's what the Gnostics did, who said Jesus wasn't really human, and didn't have a flesh and blood human body, but was merely a ghostlike phantom who only appeared to be human. (That's how they explained His walking on water — He didn't weigh anything!)

A view which I Jn 4:2-3 tells us, originates from the spirit of anti-christ:

"Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (that is, came as a real human being) is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the anti-christ..."

Which brings us to our **LAST** point — What does all this mean for us? And to answer that question I want to have us turn to one of the most comforting, pastoral, and encouraging texts in the whole Bible: The text we had read from HEBREWS 4:15.

In chapter 1 verse 2 the same author tells us that through the Son (through Jesus) "***God made the whole universe***" — affirming His deity. And in verse 3 he continues to affirm it, telling us: "***The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word.***" A verse that affirms Christ's Deity in terms about as explicit as they could possibly be!

Yet having so clearly affirmed the Deity of Christ, he then goes on to say in chapter 4:15: "***For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are — yet was without sin.***"

That seems to be the **only** difference between our humanity and Jesus humanity.

We are born with the stain of sin. He was not. / "***We are by nature children of wrath,***" says Paul. He was by nature a child of the Father. / We are born alienated from God because of Adam's sin and our own, so that what David says of himself in Psalms 51, could be said of all humanity with the exception of Jesus, "***Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the moment my mother conceived me.***" Jesus, on the other hand, was conceived apart from sin, and remained without sin all His life.

Yet don't take that wrong! That does not mean He wasn't tempted by sin! Or that being God it was easy for Him to resist sin.

The truth be told, the Scriptures imply He suffered the intensity of temptation far more severely than us, for two reasons:

1st) Because Satan knew that if He could get Jesus to sin just **ONCE**, in even the smallest infinitesimal way, the whole plan of redemption would have been foiled!

And 2^{ndly}) He suffered the intensity of temptation more severely than us because unlike us, He never gave into it! We give in to temptation and sin because it brings temporary relief from the struggle and relieves the pressure of the fight. Yet Jesus, though fully human, never did. Because He resisted without any weakening of resolve, or relaxation of obedience, He endured the intensity of temptation non-stop, and to a far greater degree than we will ever know this side of heaven.

As B. F. Westcott points out: *"Endurance and resistance of temptation actually involves more, and not less, suffering. Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin, but the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity."*

He's right, you know. Jesus battled with temptation far more than you or I ever will. The Author of Hebrews actually says that in chapter 12, verse 4, *"In your struggle against sin, you have not resisted to the point of shedding your blood."* He did! And because He did, He endured temptations relentless lure and strength far more intensely, for He never experienced the temporal relief that comes by giving in to it!

And Listen: He was not only tempted, and tempted more intensely than us, but we are told *"He was tempted IN EVERY WAY (ALL INCLUSIVE) just as we are."*

How unspeakably comforting it is to know that! Jesus, being human just like us, experienced temptation just like us, in every way just like us, making Him, and Him alone, a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses or our human struggles.

It's a truth that makes me **WANT** to go to Him, because I can be sure that in Him I have a God and Savior who understands what I'm going through / will empathize and sympathize with my plight / and will **not** simply tell me (in a stern pejorative sense) *"Look, just get your stinking act together and try a little harder."*

The word "sympathize" there, comes from the Greek word "pathos," a word from which we get our English words "passion," "feeling" or "empathy," which like "sympathy," means "to feel the same thing others have felt, or are going through."

It's a truth that assures me that when I go to Jesus, I am not going to one who doesn't or cannot understand. I am going to one who understands far more than I do! No matter what you are going through, you can never say of Jesus, "***He just wouldn't understand.***"

You see, that's the danger of letting His deity diminish His humanity. For one who was fully, primarily, or only God, temptation is nothing! The Spirit of God isn't even able to sin! Thus when we diminish or do away with His humanity in an attempt to exalt His deity, we make Him an aloof Savior who stands so far above and beyond anything we experience, and so totally separated from the struggles we wrestle with in the flesh, that He can't possibly empathize with what its like to be tempted as we are.

He becomes a God who never experienced the intense lure of bodily appetites that make us want to eat or sleep or talk more than we should! / A God who never wrestled with biological and psychological drives and desires that make us want to engage in sinful things we shouldn't, or engage in legitimate things before we should.

Wrestling with cravings we never asked for / Disturbing thoughts that seemingly come out of nowhere / Hormonal changes that cause irrational emotion or temporary emotional instability / Urges, passions or affections so strong it takes all our might to resist them / Things that tend to get the best of us when we are weak, tired or exhausted.

Yet, what the Bible wants us to know is that when we struggle with those things, we have a Savior who understands — because was tempted by every single one of them! In fact, if we understand Heb. 4:15 right, ***He was like us tempted to sin sexually, tempted to over eat, tempted to be lazy, tempted to want to hit someone, to get revenge, to belittle people, to swear, be selfish, conceited, proud, unloving, faithless, immoral, deviate from the path of godliness, or do that which would dishonor, or be contrary to the Father's will.***

If you don't think so, it's probably because you've fallen prey to the error I'm speaking of today, and will therefore always struggle with the thought that: "***Jesus was tempted in every way just like us,***" because He was human just like us. (The most noticeable difference being that unlike us He never fell to the temptation to sin.)

My friends, think of some temptation you are wrestling with in your life right now — any temptation, not one excluded — because I need to tell you, Jesus wrestled with it long before you did (maybe not the exact temptation – like addiction to video games — but the exact kind of temptation). And He wants you to know that because He did, He understands. Better yet, He “feels with you in your struggle.”

Whether its the temptation to disbelieve, the temptation to sin sexually, the temptation to not to forgive someone, the temptation to think God’s promises are not true, to hate someone or take revenge, or ignore, or be greedy, or gossip, or slander or turn your back on God — no mater what it is Jesus, we are told, knows what its like to be tempted in that way.

Being godly does not consist in being exempt from temptation, but rather, it consists of resisting temptation! All (honest) godly people will confess to being tempted — maybe even being tempted more severely than the ungodly, yet that does not make them sinful. For if being tempted constituted sin, then Jesus was a sinner! But it doesn’t (obviously)! It is giving in to temptation, or surrendering to the temptation to sin that constitutes sin!

That is your Savior, my friends. He was tempted severely in every way you are, and thus feels your pains and struggles and temptations deeply, because He did not simply inhabit a human body, He actually became human, uniting Himself with our humanness so fully and so completely that even after His resurrection, and to this very day, His divine nature and that physical body are still inseparably one (and shall be to all eternity).

“His manhood,” says J. I. Packer, *“is permanent.”* *“Though now exalted,”* says the Westminster Confession of Faith, *“He continueth to be God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.”*