

The Humanity of God

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday after Christmas, January 3, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-6; 15-18; John 1:1-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I once overheard my boys having a deep theological discussion. They were talking about Jesus and who he is. The conversation went something like this.

"Jesus is the Son of God."

"No! Jesus *is* God."

"How can Jesus be God if he's the Son of God? God is his father."

The discussion continued for a couple of minutes and became heated at times. Brothers were calling one another stupid. Then I heard one of the boys say, "Ask daddy. He knows everything there is to know about Jesus."

I thought, "Wait a second, I'm your papa not the pope."

No sooner had this been said then a budding Martin Luther protested, "Daddy doesn't know everything there is to know about Jesus."

I was beginning to think, "I don't have a family, I have a theological seminary."

That theological conversation was like overhearing Christians near the end of the first century arguing about who Jesus is. Just who was this person born on the first Christmas? Was he really God? Was he really human? Was he half human and half divine?

Christians answered those questions in many different ways. They tried to find words to express who Jesus is. They called Jesus the Son of God, the Son of David, the Christ. They called him the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd. They called him Lord and Savior. One of the many titles Christians came to attribute to Jesus was the title, Word of God. Jesus, they said, is the Word of God. Now that assertion probably sounds strange

to us. When we think of the Word of God we usually think of the Bible. It would make more sense if John had said that Jesus *speaks* the Word of God. But that's not what he says. He says Jesus *is* the Word of God.

John came to understand Jesus as the Word of God. What does that mean? To the Greek world it meant that Jesus is that which gives meaning and purpose to the world. Long before the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, Greeks believed that the Word, or *the Divine Logos*, was at work creating the world, bringing order out of chaos, bringing light out of darkness, holding the universe together, giving everything meaning and purpose. They believed that the Divine Logos or Word was that which gave men and women the ability to think and reason and ask questions. Because Jesus is the Word of God many Christians believed that people who follow the light of reason and find meaning and purpose are already in contact with and receiving the One who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.

But what John said about Jesus also appealed to Jews. To the Jew, the Word of God is that by which God makes himself known. The heathen nations had the *Logos* at work in them through the light of reason and conscience but the Jews believed they had the Word of God in the form of a special revelation. For thousands of years Jews had recognized the Word of God in the words of prophets and prophetesses like Moses, Deborah, Isaiah, and Huldah. The Jews had never seen God, but they heard his Word. But now, John asserts, the Word of God has become flesh in the person of Jesus.

The Word of God became flesh, John says. Think of that. When I read that I think of an experience I had as a child. When I was a boy growing up near Prices Corner there was a radio personality by the name of Mr Goodwill. I heard his voice ever day on the radio and sometimes I

wondered what he looked like. One Christmas Mr. Goodwill appeared in person in a Wilmington theater. My mother and I went down-town to see him. What a disappointment Mr. Goodwill was. He looked nothing at all like he sounded.

Many Jews were equally disappointed when Christians pointed to Jesus as the Word of God made flesh. It was very difficult for most Jews to see the Word of God that thundered forth from Mt. Sinai in Jesus of Nazareth, a crucified Jew,. He simply didn't look like what the Word of God sounded like. And so most Jews rejected him. "He came unto his own but his own received him not. But to as many as did receive him, to them gave he power to become the children of God."

Christians still claim that Jesus gives us the power to become the children of God when we receive him. But how do we receive Jesus today?

I have a good friend who's a minister. He was telling me about a woman he'd been counseling. He met her in a dentist's office where she was a dental hygienist. While she worked on his teeth she poured out her life story to him. She was going through a divorce. She wasn't very religious but she found she could talk with my friend. Because he had such a sympathetic ear she began attending his church. My friend and his wife invited her to dinner from time to time and they'd talk about what she was going through. She wanted to know what God and Jesus had to do with all this. She began reading a modern translation of the Bible and asking questions. All the time she was being drawn further and further into the life and worship of the church. Slowly she was coming to see Jesus as the one who could make sense of her life; One who could create for her a new life and bring light into her darkness. In all of this she was receiving Christ.

Receiving Christ isn't some formal thing you go through. It usually doesn't involve a dramatic conversion experience nor does it mean being able to affirm as true every word in the Bible and every doctrine in the Christian faith. John says that in Jesus was life; and the life was the light of men and women. When the pagan in darkest Africa or Asia begins to follow the light that they already have they're drawing near to the Christ who is present throughout Creation as the invisible Word of God.

But what about us? Jesus said that whenever we receive a little child in his name we receive him. He said that whenever we receive those whom he has sent, we receive him. He said that we receive him in the person of the least of his brothers and sisters. In other words, we can't really receive Jesus without receive flesh and blood people into our lives. We begin to receive Jesus when we let the Word of God in Scripture into our lives. We hear it, read it, think about it, argue with it, ask questions. We worship with God's children, perhaps at first on the periphery. But we're drawn further in. Christ begins to mean more and more to us. We begin to realise that as we let his people and his word into our life he gives us power to be the kind of person God wants us to be.

We also receive Christ, sacramentally, in Holy Communion. Holy Communion is a sacrament in which Jesus comes to us and asks us to let him into our lives again to strengthen us and reform us. This is something we need to do over and over. As we come to the Lord's Table today, may it be for all of us a time of receiving Christ anew because we want power to be children of God.

Let us pray. O God, Grant that we, who joyfully receive your only Son Jesus Christ as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.