

Christmas Day  
25/12/2014

Mark the Evangelist

Song of Songs 2:8-17

Psalm 21

Luke 1:26-38

### Almost human

---

As you prepare for the arrival of your first child, you hear much from more experienced friends and family about what to expect, whether the sleepless nights or the amount of extra washing which such a little creature generates or, of course, the joy which comes with that tiny, swaddled bundle of possibilities.

But one of the things I don't remember being told about is just how *funny* little kids are. But it's not, of course, that little kids have much of a sense of humour as such, although a healthy sense of the ridiculous seems to kick in pretty early. The kind of "funny" we see in them most of the time is the same kind of funny we see when watching the monkeys or the orang-utans at the zoo. There we laugh because they're so like us in the way they play and fight and explore their worlds, and yet obviously they don't do it *exactly* like us. It's the combination of their similarity to us, and the very obvious mismatches, which draws us to them and makes us smile. And so also it is with young children – it's almost as if they're real human beings. It's in the way they run – with great speed but just a little stiffly, so that it's more of a jerking up and down than a smooth flowing forward. Or it's in the way only a third of what's on the spoon ends up in the mouth. Or it's in the way little hearts are suddenly filled with more excitement than their bodies can express, and so they kind of lose control for a moment in whatever joy it is which has taken hold of them.

We who are more mature have learned, of course, to perfect or to moderate ourselves in such things. But just that fact might lead us to wonder just who indeed *is* the more human – the one who is yet too young to do it properly, or we who would love in some ways to be young like that again.

Where *is* the real human being to be found? For we would want, of course, to say that we *and* our little ones *are* truly human. We believe that, somehow, we share in the "being" of human being. And yet we are not simply *beings*; we know of no human person who is not also an *actor*, and it is our actions which confuse us about what it means to be human. Is the truly human to be found in those moments when someone's kindness or generosity catches us by surprise, or is the truly human to be found in those actions which really ought to shock us but, more often than not, simply see us shaking our heads at one more piece of evidence for the non-humanity of human beings?

When it comes to the particular burden of today's worship service – speaking of the birth of Jesus – our assumption is that he, too, is a human being. Having just been born and so not having *done* anything yet, we assume that he is human in the sense that he shares in the "stuff" of humanity – in whatever it is which makes us human apart from our actions. Yet there was a time in the life of the church when this was not at all clear. Whereas even in the church today debates about Jesus tend to revolve around whether or not he was "divine" – whatever that might mean – in the early church equally pressing was question about whether or not Jesus was *human*. Beginning with the recognition that human beings are imperfect, the controversy had to do with just how

close a perfect God could come to the imperfect world and still *remain* perfect God. The question was, then, If Jesus *does* somehow bring us God, how could he possibly be a human being like the rest of us? The attractive solutions then were those which would protect God from the messiness of the human. Some asserted that there was a sharp distinction to be drawn between Jesus' divine spirit and his physical body. Others postulated a third type of being which mediates between the divine and the fallen human.

Today we are pressed by a very different theological problem. For us the problem is not Jesus' humanity but his "divinity". The current climate of atheistic excitement is concerned, of course, with the fact (or otherwise) of the existence of divinity. But the church itself has always known that God doesn't *simply* "exist" in any meaningful sense (but that's a thought for another sermon). The more interesting question is whether in fact *human beings* "exist". Perhaps this seems a stupid suggestion, but if there is a sense in which the toddler is not yet a perfected human being and, at the same time, we more mature souls are in some senses less human than the toddler, then *where is* human being to be found?

This ought to be a pressing question if, in all of the chatter which fills our lives and in all of the words printed day after day and in all the things which are done to us or for us, we might desire to hear or to read or to experience something which is *true*, not simply in that it is factually true but more importantly in that it "truths" us – *troths* us – *pledges* us, *promises* us, *reveals* to us where we are, what we are, and what might yet become of us. These are the only truths which really matter – those which, in their being true, also *make us true*, make us ourselves.

While much energy is expended today in debates about the existence of God and about "religion" as the means of accessing God, I suspect that we've come to a time, at least in Western society, when it would be much more productive and informative to turn our attention to the question of whether, in fact, there is such a thing as a human being and, if there is, how we might find access to *it*. For the racisms and sexism and ageisms and classisms and xenophobias which reside in us all have to do with presumptions about where the truly human resides. The damage these presumptions do reflects how poorly we have grasped ourselves.

And the answer to the question of what it means to be a human being will be the solution to our questions about God. This is not to say that the human is, in the end, God. Rather, when the church speaks about incarnation – about the "coming together" of God and human being in Jesus – it speaks not of the coming together of an "idea" of God and an "idea" of the human. This could scarcely be sensible if we can't first really say what a human being truly is, let alone God. For the centres of both *our* being and of the being of *God* are equally mysterious, equally inaccessible to us, equally beyond our reach. Our operating thoughts about ourselves are simply hypotheses, models and approximations to what it must surely mean, we *have to* think, to be human. When it comes to speaking of ourselves we strike what the philosophers call "aporia" – an impasse, a condition of doubt or confusion which arises when we have evidence for something and against it, and aren't sure which way to go – but know that we must go *some way*. To be in a state of aporia is like encountering a street which terminates in a dead end, but one into which we are again and again compelled to wander, for surely one day it will *not* be a dead end, for *surely* one day it *must* not be a dead end. We are not yet what we think a human being should be, and yet we *are* human, and yet we are *not*...

If there is a sense in which God is much less real to us today, perhaps it is because we are increasingly less real to ourselves, despite all the great advances in understanding we've made on so many fronts. Our celebrations of Christmas are caught up in this confusion. Yet, at the heart of the Christmas story itself is not confusion but the seeds of a resolution, for there, the church claims, we see a true human being. The humanity of Jesus is in the harmony of where he comes from, where he is going and the path he takes. This harmony has its source in the God who is, in fact, his provenance, his path and his destiny.

At the end of John's gospel Pilate presents Jesus to the angry crowd with the words, "Behold, the man" (John 19.5). The gospeller John often has the players around Jesus speaking more truth than they know in the simplicity of their words. Here there is not simply a presentation of the beaten Jesus to the crowd but a declaration which is also a revelation: Behold, Man; Behold the Human Being; this is a fully human life. And for John, it is as "the" human being that Jesus is sent for crucifixion. That is a troubling thought, for surely our true humanity is not *that* far away from us. Surely we are not so distant from our true selves as first century Bethlehem and Jerusalem are distant from us today. But is it not a thought worth considering if, as close as we imagine we are to ourselves, we still struggle to say just what it is to be a true human being? It is not as if our usual presumption that we do know ourselves has really gotten us very far.

If we are lucky, the "almost human" we see in ourselves will more often be occasion for monkeys-at-the-zoo laughter than for tears. And God laughs, too, but not in derision or in accusation for what we lack. When God laughs at the imperfect in us it is a laughter which *perfects* us. That first Christmas was, we might say, simply the peculiar, healing laughter of God: the revelation that we *are* laughable while, at the same time, a revelation of what we are to be – the truth about us not as derision or accusation but as pledge and promise: you "are" not yet, but you *will* be.

Now, you may have noticed that I haven't yet come to my chosen scripture text – Isaiah 62.6-7. What struck me there was the prophet's call to those whose task is surely an extraordinary one – to "remind" the LORD<sup>7</sup>:

"You who remind the LORD take no rest,  
and give him no rest  
until he establishes Jerusalem  
and makes it renowned throughout the earth.

Or, to recast this in the terms I've been using this morning: People of God, take no rest, and give God no rest, until he should laugh at us again in our almost being human, that we might be renewed.

Sometimes we talk rather glibly about the "miracle of Christmas," referring to it-is-not-quite-clear-what, but sure that there is *something* there worth denoting a miracle. Miracles these days are not what they once were – now little more than purported and problematic violations of the natural order. But our word "miracle" has ancient roots and it is in those roots that we find its pastoral heart: the word "miracle" springs from an ancient word for "smile". A miracle is that which causes us to smile, to laugh.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From: [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com): [miracle \(n.\)](#) mid-12c., "a wondrous work of God," from Old French *miracle* (11c.) "miracle, story of a miracle, miracle play," from Latin *miraculum* "object of wonder" (in Church Latin, "marvelous event caused by God"), from *mirari* "to wonder at, marvel, be astonished," figuratively "to regard, esteem," from *mirus* "wonderful, astonishing, amazing," earlier *\*smeiros*, from PIE *\*smei-* "to smile, laugh" (cognates: Sanskrit *smerah* "smiling," Greek *meidan* "to smile," Old Church Slavonic *smejo* "to laugh;" see [smile](#) (v.)).

That God laughed at the first Christmas was not merely *a* miracle – noun – but “miracles” us – verb – contagiously giving us something to laugh about: ourselves in God’s loving, tear-filled-from-laughing eyes.

May this season be for you all a time of such divine and miraculous laughter, a laughter which sees what is comic in us and celebrates even that, for it is God who laughs, with a laughter which brings life and humanity and, in that, hope.

...By the grace of God: Amen.

\*\*\*