

Who is the Son of Man?

1 Samuel 16:1b, 6–7, 10–13a

Psalm 23:1–6

Ephesians 5:8–14

John 9:1, 6–9, 13–17, 34–38

Homily for Laetare Sunday

March 25-26

In today's Gospel, we are asked to answer the most basic question. Who is Jesus Christ? Jesus himself answers this question in the most explicit way when in response to the blind man we hear this exchange:

Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

Now here is something important to understand about Jesus. 82 times in the Gospels he refers to himself as the Son of Man. It is his favourite self-designation. In all these texts Jesus is the speaker; no one ever addresses him as Son of man. When we understand what Jesus meant by this title we will in turn be able to properly answer the question: "Who is Jesus Christ?"

We first come across the Son of Man title in a passage from the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel. He is an exalted figure who comes to stand before the one described as the Ancient of Days. The Ancient of Days is the Everlasting God. Daniel tells us:

***I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
14 And to him was given dominion
and glory and kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.***

So when in today's Gospel Jesus asks, do you believe in the Son of Man, and the man enquires who is he sir, and Jesus says: You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he; Jesus

clearly answers this question in unequivocal terms. I am the one who has everlasting dominion, the promised figure of Daniel chapter 7.

But here is the point I want you to grasp. Jesus knows who he is. Remember he uses this designation Son of Man 82 times in the Gospels. But many people do not see Jesus clearly as does the man who can now see. The more important sight this man gains is not his physical sight but his spiritual sight. John tells us he said:

“Lord, I believe.” And he worshiped him.

The religious leaders in Jerusalem come to a very different conclusion: They first of all conclude that:

“This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.”

Later on in the story they become even more vehement in their rejection of Jesus and declare:

We know that this man is a sinner.

Then they state definitively:

We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.

They concluded that Jesus was a bad man, a sinner. They are the ones who are blind for they do not see Jesus for who he truly is: The Son of Man. They do not want to carefully weigh the evidence before them, something the man who now sees challenges them to do. In our day it is not so much that they would accuse Jesus of being a sinner. No, in our day, the conclusion is he was a great religious teacher but not more than that. However, this answer is as wrong as the one deduced by the Pharisees.

C.S. Lewis in countering this modern error argues:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice

Let me unpack what Lewis is stating here in more detail.

What would we think of a person who went around making these claims today, I am the Son of Man. Certainly not that he was a good man or a sage. There are only two possibilities: he either speaks the truth or not. If he speaks the truth, he is God and the case is closed. We must believe him and worship him. If he does not speak the truth, then he is not God but a mere man. But a mere man who wants you to worship him as God is not a good man. He is a very bad man indeed, either morally or intellectually. If he knows that he is not God, then he is morally bad, a liar trying deliberately to deceive you into blasphemy. If he does not know that he is not God, if he sincerely thinks he is God, then he is intellectually bad—in fact, insane.

A measure of your insanity is the size of the gap between what you think you are and what you really are. If I think I am the greatest priest in the Catholic Church I am only an arrogant fool; if I think I am Napoleon, I am probably over the edge; if I think I am a butterfly, I am fully embarked from the sunny shores of sanity. But if I think I am God, I am even more insane because the gap between anything finite and the infinite God is even greater than the gap between any two finite things, even a man and a butterfly.

The argument can simply and memorably be termed the "trilemma": "Lord, liar, or lunatic?" Those are the only options. Well, then, why not liar or lunatic? But almost no one who has read the Gospels can honestly and seriously consider that option. The savviness, the canniness, the human wisdom, the attractiveness of Jesus emerge from the Gospels with unavoidable force to any but the most hardened and prejudiced reader.

His practical wisdom—his ability to read human hearts, to understand people and the real, unspoken question behind their words, his ability to heal people's spirits, as well as their bodies;

His deep and winning love—his passionate compassion, his ability to attract people and make them feel at home and forgiven, his authority, "not as the scribes"; and above all his ability to astonish—his unpredictability, his creativity. Liars and lunatics are all so dull and predictable! No one who knows both the Gospels and human beings can seriously entertain the possibility that Jesus was a liar or a lunatic, a bad man.

No, the unbeliever almost always believes that Jesus was a good man, a prophet, a sage. Well then, if he was a sage, you can trust him and believe the essential things he says. And the essential thing he says is that he is the divine Savior of the world and that you must come to him for salvation. Remember 82 times he says he is the fulfillment of Daniel 7. If he is a sage, you must accept his essential teaching as true. If his teaching is false, then he is not a sage.

This is the question that is more important than any other. God wants us to be like Samuel in our first reading. He knew that when David passed before him here is the Lord's anointed. David anticipated the truly anointed one the Lord Jesus Christ.

What difference does it make as to how we answer this question:

Who is Jesus?

St Paul tells us clearly. To declare "Lord I believe" means that we are now children of the light. We have been given the insight to see who Jesus really is. This means that the rest of our earthly life is to be spent in what Paul describes as the pursuit of all that is good, pleasing and true. We are to grow in lives of virtue. This is a daily work and one that we are inspired to do because of who Jesus is. We are to awake from spiritual slumber, rise from the death of sin so that Christ will shine on us.

Let me allow C.S. Lewis have the last word:

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”