

The Humanity of Jesus

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One of the tendencies in thinking and talking about Jesus today is that of a growing emphasis on his humanity and particularly on the social background in which his ministry and life was situated. There are many historical studies of Jesus, but no real consensus in characterising the figure that he represented. Some see a good Jew trying to put his religion back on course, others a social revolutionary, others again a wisdom figure in the Greek tradition. It perhaps comes as no surprise to learn that those who see Jesus as a good Jew are Jewish, those a social revolutionary are revolutionaries, those a wisdom prophet are fans of Greek philosophy. Who is this man Jesus that we have vowed to follow in the Carmelite way?

One of the most beautiful chapels in Aylesford is on the right of the main shrine and it is dedicated to St. Anne, the mother of Mary and it tells the story of how Anne became pregnant, the birth of Mary and her presentation in the Temple as a young girl. On the wall at the back is a Flemish statue of St. Anne holding the Child Jesus and the infant Mary in her arms. The point is clear: Jesus is part of a human family - a holy, worthy, orthodox family to be sure - but essentially human. This is also the reason we have Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's gospel: to emphasise that Jesus comes from a human lineage, and it is one that goes back to king David, thus accentuating also the connection between the promise made to David by the prophet Nathan of an eternal royal dynasty.

Jesus is born into this world - a crying, mewling baby, weak, vulnerable and fragile. "He was like us in all things but sin." So he could experience the whole range of human emotions; he could appreciate beauty, joke, laugh, cry and grieve. We know that he enjoyed inviting people for a meal (and it is a constant source of personal consolation to me that one of the images of heaven is a banquet!) He could also make mistakes, get it wrong, even not know the answer to a question (and please note Jesus did not know and could not have possibly explained the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics or why the wretched Canada geese come back to Aylesford in such vast numbers each year!)

Unfortunately, there is also an assumption among some that by stressing the fact that Jesus was a man, somehow his divinity is diminished. There is, if you like, an implicit tension between the human and divine in Jesus. If we underline the humanity of Jesus we somehow seem to be decreasing his divinity. But this is not the only way of looking at the divine and the human in Jesus. In each one of us God is present as the source of our very existence: there is no one who has such an intimate, personal relationship because he is the one who makes us 'be'. In everything we do God is also at work, perfecting, strengthening and at the root of our actions. The more we are what God made us to be, the more we are human, the more God is at work in us. If we think then of Jesus as the prime example of full, active, vibrant humanity, then we can also begin to see how his divinity, far from being squeezed out, is given the fullest possible scope and space to be at the heart of Jesus' ministry - and his suffering and death too.

What does this have to do with us? As Carmelites we pledge to follow Christ in a particular format or configuration, the charism of Carmel. We are called to be another Christ, a co-worker and co-sufferer in the world, encouraging the growth

of humanity to its fullest actualisation and realisation, so that the spark of the divine in us has room to grow and to glow. "May we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity" prays the priest as he mingles the wine and water. Following Christ means being human - to the full, actively and without reserve. During this Marian Year we celebrate that process in the life of the Virgin. What we acknowledge and salute in many of our brothers and sisters in Carmel is their constancy and faithfulness in following in the footsteps of Christ, in their humanity with all that it entails for them, for supporting their brothers and sisters on the way and for bringing the divine into a world too often bereft of beauty and hope. We look to the future with optimism and confidence, but let us also remember all those who have gone before us in the steps of Jesus Christ and without whom our Carmelite tradition would not have developed.