

He lived among us

Nearly everybody knew that Jesus was from Nazareth in Galilee. For the local people he was just the carpenter's son. The mere mention of his village sparked the prejudice of Nathaniel, one of his later disciples. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he asked with disdain. The rural accents of Jesus and his friends were noticed when they went to the city.

Yet this carpenter's son was the Son of God become human flesh and blood. It happened during the reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus (31 B.C.-14 A.D.). God was actually born as a human being not just in appearance but in reality. One's capacity to be amazed can easily become blunted. Those who knew him during his lifetime needed no faith at all to accept that he was fully human. If any of those Galileans were to come back today they would be astonished to hear that the Church found it necessary to make belief in his humanity a binding truth. For them it was perfectly evident. Jesus was not part God and part human, or a confused mixture of divine and human. In him the Word of God became truly man while remaining truly God.

Fully human means not ninety per cent human nor even ninety-nine-point-nine-nine-nine per cent human but one hundred per cent human. The people of his time had many arguments about his relationship to God but they never doubted the humanity. Two thousand years later the thinking of many Christians about Jesus is shaped by the opening lines of the Gospel of John: *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.* Starting with the divinity they tend to remain with it. But God did not become God in Jesus. God became man in Jesus.

It is so easy to miss the wonder of this humanity with all its limitations. Maybe this is understandable. The human is ordinary and commonplace, even boring. It can easily be taken for granted or regarded as unimportant. The divine on the other hand inspires awe. There is always a tendency to believe that there can be no meeting with God in everyday things, in the joys and tensions of everyday living. There is always a temptation to find a by-pass around the human, to try to get to God by some less awkward route.

Jesus spent over ninety per cent of his thirty-three years in Nazareth, living a life very much like that of his neighbours. He knew them well. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their generosity and meanness. From day to day he lived among them, in this place where the circumstances of history placed him. Why was so much time 'wasted' in this unimportant place? Maybe because ninety per cent of most people's lives are lived in a kind of Nazareth, where they do not choose their neighbours or the other people who enter their lives.

During those thirty years we can assume that the local people must have seen Jesus as the best of neighbours, but essentially, as one of themselves. Otherwise, why were they so amazed when he began to act so differently about the age of thirty? "Don't we all know him and the family he comes from?" From early on people found it difficult to believe that God could do anything through this child of their own neighbours.

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