

Fr James Martin SJ - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about Faith and Religion

The third of five excerpts from a talk given by him at the recent World Youth Day in Lisbon

5. Who is Jesus?

What most people say is: *“Well, okay, I admire Jesus as a human being. Being so charitable and all that. But I have a hard time with him being the Son of God and all that. In other words, what does it mean for him to be fully human and fully divine? How does that work?”*

The first time I was in the Holy Land, to research for a book, one of my goals was to see one special place. When I was a Jesuit novice I had read about a place called the Bay of Parables, where Jesus got into a boat on the shoreline, pushed out into the Sea of Galilee and preached to the crowd. Then he compares the reception of the good news to different kinds of soil. Some people are like rocky soil, where things can't take root, others like soil with thorns, where the lure of wealth chokes things off, and some are like fertile soil, where things take root.

Something about that passage used to confuse me: Why does he get into a boat? Why does he actually go farther away from the crowd? A few years after the novitiate, I was on holiday with some Jesuits, and we were at a house that was near a little harbour, and I could hear all the people talking from the boats, about a mile away from where we were staying. I remarked on this and one of my companions said, *“Oh yes, well sound travels over water easily. That's why Jesus preached those parables from the boat.”* I thought that was fascinating. It reminded me that sometimes the things you don't “get” about the Gospels often have a real-life explanation.

On our pilgrimage, after some mishaps and misadventures, we found the Bay of Parables. It was just outside Capernaum, where Jesus is described as preaching the parables. As I stood there, here's what I saw all around me: huge rocks, thorn bushes and fertile ground. Just like in the parable. And it dawned on me that when Jesus was preaching this parable, he wasn't speaking about rocks in general, or thorn bushes in general, but about these things right here, right in front of the people. We sometimes think of the

Son of God as being divinely inspired by the Father, and he was. But he also drew on his human experience. Standing by the Bay of Parables helped me to understand him as fully human and fully divine.

Who is Jesus? So many answers: He is a carpenter from Nazareth. He is the Son of God. He is a man who got tired, ate and drank and wept.

Outside of Nazareth, about a 90-minute walk, is a town called Sepphoris. Now, Nazareth was tiny: 200 to 400 people. Sepphoris, by contrast, was a huge town of about 30,000 people, which at the time of Jesus's boyhood and young adulthood was being rebuilt by King Herod. It had an amphitheatre that seated 4,000 people, a royal court, banks, stores that sold mosaics. You can visit the ruins today and see all those things, and you can tell it was a wealthy town. And if you think of Jesus walking from wealthy Sepphoris to poor Nazareth, returning to Mary and Joseph, living very simply, it's easy to imagine him wondering about income disparities, and why the poor have it so hard. And who knows if the things he saw in Sepphoris about the wealthy didn't make it into one of his parables? Or if the woman looking for her lost coin isn't his mother? We tend to think of Jesus as fully divine, which he is, but we forget how his fully human experiences contributed to who he was.

Who is Jesus? So many answers: He is a carpenter from Nazareth. He is the Son of God. He is a man who got tired, ate and drank and wept. He healed the sick. He raised people from the dead. He got frustrated and angry. He is the Second Person of the Trinity, our Saviour and Messiah, the Risen One, but he is also our brother, friend and companion. Pedro Arrupe, the former superior general of the Society of Jesus, was once asked, "*Who is Jesus for you?*" And he said, "*For me, Jesus is everything!*" Until people start to understand his humanity, it's hard to understand his divinity. So usually I start with the human nature of Jesus, and as people come to know him they, in a sense, trust him. And trust in what he does and in who he says he is, which is the Son of God. In the end though, fully human and fully divine is a mystery, an F.A.Q. if there ever was one, but one well worth pondering, for a lifetime.