

## Sermon

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*Son of Man or Superman?*

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It's a question for which there are many answers.

According to Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

"Some say John the Baptist," they respond, "but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Then Jesus turns to them and asks, "Who do **you** say I am?"

This is a question I would like to pose to each of you at the beginning of our Lenten journey:

Christ has been born. He lay in a manger. He grew in wisdom. He struggled with temptation. So, what does this make him? Who do you say he is — Superman or the Son of Man?

### **A Popular Answer**

Many people think of Jesus as a figure from another world, a heavenly being who walked *among us yet not as one of us*.

Consider the account Dorothee Soelle shares in her book, *Theology for Skeptics*. "Many years ago," she writes, "when I was still a small shy student, I asked a man at a construction site, 'Do you happen to know what time it is?' He gave me such a strange answer that at that time I was completely speechless.

"'Am I Jesus?' he said in a kind of good-humored mockery. Always when I reflect on who this Jesus, let alone this Christ, is supposed to be for us today, this man with his question gets in my way. Am I Jesus?" (p. 88)

I'm sure you grasp the implication.

"For this worker," Soelle explains, "Jesus is from another world. A heavenly being who has nothing to do with us, who sees, hears, knows and can do everything. The churchly language, which has called him Messiah, Lord, Son of God, the Christ, gets its due here" (ibid.).

Yet what a strange view when you consider the words of the Apostles' Creed, which was written to counter the denial of Jesus' full humanity — a popular heresy that had emerged toward the end of the first century.

Every time we recite the Creed, we affirm the *full humanity* of Jesus: he was born. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified. He died, and he was buried. These things – birth, suffering, and death – exemplify what it means to be a living, breathing, human being.

Why, then, do people like the construction worker Soelle mentions think of Jesus as some kind of all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful being from another world? What makes it so difficult to accept his full humanity?

### **Seeking Answers**

Obviously, there are many ways to answer this question. We could turn, for example, to the popularity of superheroes in contemporary American culture. Think of Superman, for example.

Did you know Superman has two identities? The first is as the newspaper reporter Clark Kent. The second is **Kal-El**, a name derived in part from biblical Hebrew. Kal-El can be translated “Voice of God” or perhaps as we see it in the Gospel of John, “Word of God.”

As the “Voice of God” or “Word of God,” Kal-El was sent to Earth by his Father **Jor-El** to save humanity.

That sounds a little familiar, doesn't it?

Of course, analysis of pop-culture and its love of superheroes can only get us so far.

If you truly want to uncover the mystery of how the Son of Man became Superman, you have to go back to Scripture.

### **Evidence in the Text**

In spite of the fact that the early church denounced as heresy the denial of Jesus' full humanity, we can see **why** people drew this conclusion.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Hebrews 4:15. Both indicate that Jesus was like us in every way except without sin. The author of Hebrews, however, makes matters worse. He (or she) refers to Jesus being “made perfect” in three separate passages.

Even in the Gospels, where the light of his humanity breaks out into the open as evident, for example,

when he weeps in John's Gospel, there seems to be a **cover-up**. Do you remember, for instance, the story of Jesus' rejection in Nazareth?

According to Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, Jesus "could *do* no deed of power [or miracle] there" due to the crowd's lack of faith. Yet when Matthew retells the story about a decade later, he makes a subtle but important change! Instead of indicating that Jesus *could not* perform miracles there, he says Jesus *would not* perform miracles there because of their unbelief.

Do you see the difference?

Mark's account reveals to us the full humanity of Jesus insofar as he encounters limitation: he cannot heal the people around him because they lack faith. Matthew's account, on the other hand, covers it up by having Jesus *choose* not to exercise his power.

Christian tradition would eventually codify Jesus' perfection and power as evident in the Nicene Creed, which was written long after the Apostles' Creed to counter those who were now denying the *divinity* of Christ. This is why, instead of talking about his birth, suffering and death, it refers to him as "God from God, light from true light, of one being with the Father."

No wonder today people think of Jesus (inside and outside of the church) as Superman instead of the Son of Man. "That's what you get," Soelle writes, when the "thinkers and fathers of the faith . . . make Jesus" unreachable (ibid.).

Jesus, it would seem, came from another world; he walked *among us yet not as one of us*.

### **What is at Stake?**

It would be tempting to offer here a quick and easy rebuttal of the otherworldly, superhero version of Jesus. What happens, for example, when Superman doesn't show up to rescue us from our problems.

Yet before we go any further, we have a more basic question to ask: why does it matter? What is at stake in the denial of Jesus' humanity?

Consider this for starters: if Jesus is the one who makes God personal to us yet we can't relate to him, then God remains *distant, inaccessible, and thus irrelevant*.

People need that personal connection with God, which explains why the saints play such a significant role in the Roman Catholic faith.

By denying the humanity of Christ in doctrine, art, and stained glass windows, the Church made Jesus increasingly **unrelatable** to the everyday believer. The saints, as a result, took his place as mediators between God and human beings. The highway to heaven thus became a holy hierarchy: God and Jesus exist “up there” at the top; we exist “down here” at the bottom, and the saints go marching in-between, carrying our prayers to God and perhaps delivering us messages from above.

## **Making God Relatable Again**

What, then, can we do?

How can we turn Jesus back from Superman into the Son of Man, not only so that **he** becomes relatable again but that through him **God** becomes relatable as well?

Well, we could go back to Scripture and learn “the rest of the story” when it comes to the passages I previously cited.

Let’s start with Hebrews 4:15. It says that even as we identify Christ as a high priest he is nevertheless capable of sympathizing with our weaknesses? Why? Because in him we have a person “who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus spends “forty days,” which simply means a long time, being put to the test by the devil who lures him with the prospect of power, the kind that would give him political authority over “all the kingdoms of the world.”

Not all of us experience this form of temptation, yet most of us are watching it play out right now on the world stage as Vladimir Putin seeks to re-establish the old Russian Empire by overtaking Ukraine militarily. Putin embodies and represents the “Old Adam,” the one who succumbs to the devil’s temptation of power and destroys anyone who stands in his way.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the “New Adam,” the one who experiences being tempted by the will-to-power, yet overcomes it by emptying himself, as Paul says in Philippians 2, taking the form of a servant. He, too, was tempted by power as a charismatic person. Yet he cast it aside, which made it easier for him to conquer the temptation upon entering Jerusalem where people initially declared him king.

As the author of Hebrews puts it: he suffered, yet he also persevered right to the end, and out of that experience God **made him perfect**.

## **A Mistranslation**

The claim that God made Jesus perfect should give us pause. For one thing, it suggests that Jesus wasn't perfect from the beginning. He made mistakes. He experienced temptation. Jesus **learns** to trust God in and through his experience of hardship, which explains why the word "perfect" is probably a mistranslation.

In Ephesians 4:13, we read that God calls us "through the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God" not to perfection but to "complete maturity."

Now stay with me.

In Hebrews, the same word for "maturity" is translated as "perfection." But I think that's a mistake. Why? Because, as Hebrews says, Jesus went through a process of learning from his suffering, one that accordingly resulted in his *complete maturity* before God.

We saw this earlier in the church year when Jesus engaged the leaders of the Temple by listening and asking questions. Luke concludes the story by saying he "increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor."

Jesus growth is inspiring. It draws him down from heaven and plants his feet firmly into the earth. If as a human being Jesus stumbled, if he was tempted, if he wept, if struggled, then we can do so too in confidence that God still loves us.

By growing and by maturing, Jesus becomes relatable. Here we have the good news: Jesus joins you and me in our faith journey through his search for wisdom, through his vulnerability, through his limitations, and especially in his mistakes.

Listen closely (or read on)!

## **The Woman at the Table**

Remember the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew. She cries out to Jesus in distress regarding her daughter who has been possessed. At first, Jesus dismisses her. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she replies, "[but] even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Here the narrative makes it clear that Jesus' disposition suddenly changes. Her response surprises him, so much so that in spite of what he just said, he praises her for

her faith, heals her daughter, and expands his mission to include Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, Matthew's Gospel ends with him sending his disciples out to "all nations."

What a shift!

Some of us might resist the claim that Jesus changed his mind because of the woman's response. In my view, however, Jesus' change of heart doesn't make him less divine. Instead, it takes the incarnation seriously by revealing his *full participation* in the human experience. He learns as we do. He makes mistakes or errors of judgment. He even admits his ignorance (see Mark 13:32). He not only walks *among us* – he *is* one of us.

## The Question

Let us now return to our initial question. Who is Jesus? Who do you say he is?

Is he Superman, the all-knowing, all-powerful, otherworldly being whom Dorothee Soelle encountered in her conversation with the construction worker?

Or is he the Son of Man, the vulnerable messiah, the human being who began as a gurgling, helpless baby; the teenager who questioned, learned, and grew; the adult who encountered temptation and endured great suffering, yet through it all achieved a faith of such "complete maturity" that it enabled him ultimately to trust God "with his very life . . . until the last drop of life [was] wrung out of [him]" (*Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*, p. 100).

These are the options.

Christ has been born. He lay in a manger. He grew in wisdom. He struggled with temptation. So what does that make him?

Who do **you** say he is – the Son of Man or Superman?

Amen