

Sermon Preached April 26, 2009
Year B, Easter 3
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
North Andover, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Wilson

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be
always acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.

One day St Peter gets tired with standing at the pearly gates and
giving or denying access to Heaven. So he takes a vacation. Jesus offers to
take over. Then a man comes up to him.

“I’m looking for my son.” Says the man.

“And who are you” asks Jesus

“I suppose I’m the closest thing he has to a Father.” says the man

“What do you do?” asks Jesus curiously

“I suppose you could say I’m a carpenter” says the man

“And does your son have holes in his hands and feet?” asks Jesus
excitedly.

“He does!” shouts the man

“DADDY!” shouts Jesus

“PINNOCHIO?” asks Giepetto

When Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection, as with Giepetto, there is some confusion as to who he is. The eleven are gathered and they have begun to hear stories about the resurrected Christ from the women, from Cleopas and others, but at this point in Luke, they have not yet seen or believed themselves. They dare not. They saw their friend and master dead and buried. When Jesus now appears before them, they think he is a ghost. They believe they are looking at death instead of new life. They are frightened and disbelieving. So Jesus has to do something to convince them that he is flesh and blood. He has to prove to them that he is really human. So he tells them to touch his hands and feet, to feel the nail holes. He then does something mundane, but telling, by eating a piece of broiled fish. A ghost cannot eat, but a human of flesh and blood can. The disciples start to get it! Jesus is real! Jesus is alive!

For the early church, the question of Christ's humanity was an important one. Was Jesus God? Was he human? Or was he both? Perhaps Jesus was just spirit who merely looked human. Perhaps God just covered himself in human form, sort of like putting on a suit of clothes. Or maybe Jesus wasn't born but just appeared, fully formed, one day as an adult.

Answering these questions is important because if Jesus were not fully human, then he did not really suffer on the cross. If Jesus were not flesh and blood, then he did not really rise from the dead. It also denies the importance of God's created material universe. There were heretics in the early church who believed matter was evil and created by Satan, while God ruled over only that which was spiritual. Flesh is evil; so to say that Jesus is human was blasphemous in their eyes. To say that God suffered is crazy. One early heresy said that at the last minute Simon of Cyrene took Jesus' place on the cross. In this way Christ, who was all spirit, didn't suffer, and his resurrection was simply the reappearance of his spiritual self which merely looked human.¹ Another heresy even claimed that Christ wasn't flesh, but had an astral body made of superior substance.

The Council of Chalcedon met in the year 451 to answer these questions once and for all. It was a group of priests and theologians who met over a period of months to debate, pray and discern the true nature of Christ. The final decision was that Christ must be both fully human and fully God. Not 50% human and 50% God, but 100% human and 100% God.

¹ J.P. ARENDZEN, Transcribed by Joseph P. Thomas, *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume V*, Copyright © 1909 by Robert Appleton Company, Online Edition Copyright © 2003 by Kevin Knight

Their statement is found in the back of our prayer book under the historical documents of the church. In that ancient text defining orthodoxy, “Definition of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ,” it is stated that Christ is “recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union.”

It’s a paradox. Christ must be fully God because he claimed and showed himself to be the Son of God. Christ must be fully human or the incarnation, the suffering on the cross, the resurrection, and the entire central claims of Christianity are meaningless. If he’s just spirit, then all that stuff was just a parlor trick to look real.

That’s why it was so important that the disciples saw Jesus eat the fish. They realized that he wasn’t a ghost, or spirit, or astral body. He was the resurrected body of God. Later that resurrected body ascends to heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And later still, as I discussed at Easter, he returns to earth at the fulfillment of time and all of us are resurrected. Each back to our physical bodies, perfected.

Through baptism we join into the body of Christ. That means that we become part of a collection of people over the centuries, living and dead, who are the body of Christ. We are Jesus' arms and legs, his mouth and checkbook, his eyes and ears, his heart and love. We are physical matter, like Jesus at the fish fry on the beach. God's work and kingdom are lived out through us in this life as we are Christ's body.

In a certain mountain village, a nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. Finally, he decided to build a church for a legacy. The plans for the church were kept secret. When it was completed, the people gathered and marveled at the church's beauty.

But an astute observer asked, "Where are the lamps? How will the church be lighted?" Without answer, the nobleman pointed to some brackets in the wall, then he gave to each family a lamp to be carried to the worship service and hung on its proper place on the wall.

“Each time you are here, the area where you are seated will be lighted,” explained the nobleman. “Each time you are not here, that area will be dark. Whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God’s house will be dark.”

In the same way, whenever we fail to live as Christ’s body, some part of God’s earth will be dark. As Christ body, we are charged with carrying Christ’s light to a dark and sinful world. The material fleshy earth is created and loved by God. Jesus took on that flesh, suffered and died for it. As part of the body of Christ, we are do Christ’s work in the world and live as if the Kingdom already exists. That is what Peter and John are doing in the passage from Acts. They heal a man and then are arrested. Peter is then given strength by being filled with the Holy Spirit, and he proclaims Jesus to the people.

As part of the Body of Christ, we too are given strength and comfort from the Holy Spirit, we heal a broken world, and we proclaim by word and example the good news of Jesus Christ.

Let us go forth with the power of today's Gospel message firmly implanted in our lives, renewed and reflecting the words of St. Augustine: "You are the Body of Christ. In you and through you the work of the incarnation must go forward. You are to be taken. You are to be blessed, broken, and distributed, that you may be the means of grace and the vehicles of eternal love." Amen.