

The Son of Man has Come

Canon Neil Patterson – Sunday 5th July 2026

2 Samuel 2.1-11, Luke 18.31-19.10

Today's New Testament reading is bookended by Jesus referring to himself in a phrase so familiar that we probably hardly register it – the Son of Man. So I think it is worth reflecting a bit this evening, helped by our first reading, about why exactly Jesus may have chosen to refer to himself in this somewhat cryptic way. There have been very many theological books on the matter, which I have not consulted recently, but in choosing to refer to himself in a way that emphasised his humanity, I suggest that Jesus helps us to understand our own.

A bit of language first, listen carefully! The expression is not, of course, unique to Jesus in the Bible. Most memorably it appears frequently in the book of Ezekiel as the way the Lord addresses the prophet. The Hebrew is **בן־אדם**. (ben-adam) Now, as you may know there are two words in Hebrew often translated 'man.' Most common is **איש**, (ish) 'a man,' with its cognate **אישה**, (ishah) 'a woman,' used mostly for individuals – and indeed not only for humans. When the animals go into the Ark in Genesis, what our NRSV translation puts as, 'the male and his mate' it is actually, 'the **איש** and his **אישה**.' Or in Isaiah 40 where he declares how the Lord created the stars and calls them out, 'not one of them is missing,' it is 'not an **איש** of them is missing.'

Whereas in **בן־אדם**, the word is **אדם** – cognate with **אדמה**, (adamah) earth, and yes, it is the same as the name Adam, and means much more generally 'human.' And there is the same relation in Latin between human and 'humus,' soil. One of the plainest ways one can know that the creation story in Genesis is metaphorical is that the main characters are given names that simply mean 'Human' and 'Life.' And so, to be called, or call oneself, **בן־אדם**, is to emphasise the human and earthly. When the Lord speaks to Ezekiel out of his awesome fiery angelic chariot, it is understandable that our translators render it, 'Mortal.' And Ezekiel obligingly falls on his face in fear.

I wonder how it would be if we heard Jesus like that, though? It seems to me that we tend to hear 'Son of Man' as something of a special title, because it goes with Jesus, and perhaps we think immediately of 'Son of God.' But what if it was translated Mortal, or the Mortal One? "Everything that is written about the Mortal by the prophets will be accomplished." "For the Mortal came to seek out and save the lost." It becomes a declaration by Jesus of his true and full humanity, above all as the one, for all his heavenly origins and mission, who will do the truly human thing, and die.

But there is more to being truly human than dying, much as we know it will come to us all, and that it is in the death and resurrection of Jesus that we hope. Which is where the first reading is of interest, for it comes from the long story of that most human of Old Testament characters, King David. Though there is much about his Bronze Age story that is strange to us, I still find it remarkable that we can read a life, however much edited by his admirers, that plainly tells of human life and emotions in people who lived perhaps 3,000 years ago. And in the middle of our reading is one such snippet – David hears that the people of Jabesh-Gilead had given decent burial to his defeated predecessor Saul, and he honours them for their goodness even as he displaces him and is crowned in turn.

But David's story is full of such personal moments. We all remember the failings, to be sure, especially his seduction of Bathsheba, whose feelings about the whole experience are unrecorded. But there are others of a less dubious character that bring him to life – he has favourites and opinions, he seeks out Saul's crippled son to do some good to him, and laments for the harm his mistakes cause. Many of his actions as king would cause justified horror to any reputable corporate HR or Safeguarding department, and yet somehow they are part of our connection to him.

This is significant when we think about Jesus, the Mortal one. He did not, of course, seduce other people's wives and arrange their deaths. But it is inevitable that living a human life, even Jesus' good interventions were in a sense partial, and limited. The Greek of the story of Zacchaeus is as ambiguous as the English – was it Zacchaeus or Jesus who was short? Jesus healed those he met – but what about those whom he didn't meet, who happened to be in the wrong place in the crowd, or of course who weren't in Galilee or Jerusalem at all? Lovely for the widow of Nain that he restored her son to life – but what about all the other grieving mothers? And he was able to stir up the crowd against the dubious rule of that fox, Herod Antipas – but what about all the other questionable politicians in need of reproof?

But for Jesus to be truly human, truly mortal and able to partake in the death that comes to us all, he had to be truly limited in time and space. And only so could he connect with us, be one of us. And this applies, I suggest, to us all in everything we do with others. I think perhaps naturally of ministry. We can imagine what we might think of as the perfect priest, better even than Tatjana in her newly minted orders. One who remembered, without fail, not only everyone's name, but their pastoral situation, and asked an appropriate, but not too intrusive, question when you met them. One who always answered every email efficiently, and was on top of every detail of the rotas. Who was always calm and prepared for every meeting and liturgy, and sang the necessary parts in the service note-perfect without fail. And, vergers, wore their vestments perfectly without any lopsidedness, and

returned them laid out neatly at the end of every service. And perhaps, as AI advances, such a priest, or at least a digital imitation of one, may soon be easily achievable.

I still think, and hope, though, that we would know the difference, and find such a minister, or such a teacher, musician, lawyer, shop assistant, politician, doctor or friend to be false. Not truly human. Because to be truly human is to be imperfect and partial, just as Jesus necessarily was. To have favourites, both in people and tastes, not because of unfairness, but simply because some personalities chime and some do not. To be better at some things than others, and to show weariness or exasperation from time to time (as Jesus undoubtedly did – think of all the times he protested at his clueless disciples, ‘How long must I put up with you?’)

So as we strive to live lives of good for the sake of God in this world, may we remember that what truly makes us precious and unique is the individual, the particular. Of course, that can be an excuse for selfish behaviour, and we can guard against it by reflecting on our effect on others. But it is our humanness that makes us loveable, and if we are to help others live in love, we must be ready to be loved ourselves, even as we are loved by God. For only then may we live out the life of the Son of Man, the Mortal one, who came to seek out and to save the lost.