

Listening and Questioning

Rev. John Allen

Our Christian doctrine of the incarnation says that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. This is something that perhaps you have heard said a lot. But when you start to get down into the particulars, you can run into some confusing paradoxes.

And in this morning's scripture story, we get a big one.

It comes in the last line. Jesus increased in wisdom and in years.

That is to say that as he grew up, Jesus learned things, and got smarter.

Now this is of course not hard understand for the humanity of Jesus. After all, it is the basic human condition that overtime we learn and grow.

But does God really need to learn things? If Jesus is fully divine, shouldn't he have been born knowing everything?

But then, again would that have meant that the newborn Jesus in the manger could have spoken with his mother, and solved complex math problems? That idea is just as absurd...

Interestingly enough in the story of Jesus birth as it is told in the Qu'ran, the sacred text of Muslims, Jesus does speak from the cradle when he is only a few days old, defending his mother against people who doubt her account of how he came to be born.

I tend to find that account strains credibility. But it gets at the heart of this question. If Jesus was both God and Human, how could that be, given that there is so much about what it means to be human that seems incompatible with what it means to be God.

Now there is an easy and straightforward answer to this question, but it is deeply unsatisfying.

We don't really know the first thing about what it means to be God. We tend to imagine that God is just a bigger stronger version of us. So if we are intelligent and know some things, God must be really intelligent and know everything.

But what if God does not "know" things the way we do. God doesn't just have the best human mind, but God does not have a human mind at all.

Like I said, unsatisfying. But the truth is when we wonder at level we are wading into mystery. Which is a wonderful and holy place to be, but it is not a place from which we can return with neat and tidy answers.

But what I find fascinating is that we could have avoided this whole esoteric thought experiment all together, if the story were just told slightly differently.

The story goes that Jesus has come to Jerusalem with his family, he is 12 years old. A few days into the return journey, Mary and Joseph are looking for Jesus among the caravan that they traveled with, and they cannot find him. So they rush back to Jerusalem and find him sitting in the temple.

And what is he doing? He is listening. And asking questions.

We could have avoided all of this if the story just said he was teaching. If he was telling everyone how it is.

But now. He is listening. And asking questions. And then later, the story tells us, he is increasing in wisdom, as he grows in years.

Throughout the Gospels, there are so many of the ordinary rules of being human that seem not to apply to Jesus. He can raise the dead with a word. He strolls effortlessly across the surface of a stormy sea. Food multiplies in his hands. And water turns to wine.

How easy then would it have been to say also that he was born knowing everything he needed to know.

But that is not what the story says.

It seems in fact that learning, and growing, are such immutable parts of the human experience, that Jesus could not be said to have been human without them. To deprive Jesus of the process of education, would be to undercut the idea that he was human at all. It would make him more like one of Greek Gods, who might visit Earth, but are not born of Earth.

But Jesus was a human. Like you. Like me. And to be human is to learn, and grow.

I bring this up, because I worry that we are living in a time when a lot of us have forgotten how deeply essential learning is to being human.

I worry that a lot of us reach a point in our lives, and then decide that we know everything we need to know.

We shut off our curiosity. And retreat into smaller and smaller circles of people who know what we know, think like we think, and repeat back to us what we already believe.

The great gift of our now hyper-connected world is that we have a chance to meet and connect with people around the world whose lives and experiences vary from our own. Unfortunately, we have mostly perverted this gift into an opportunity to find people who are more and more like us, and gather into impenetrable tribes.

There is nothing wrong with having strong and clear principles. I have them.

The problem comes when we lose our curiosity about the experiences and motivations of others.

Parisa Parsa, who formally served as the Pastor of First Parish across the green is now the executive director of Essential Partners, a nonprofit organization based in Cambridge.

They are researching and trying to learn how best to structure conversations between people about contentious topics. A skill sorely needed in this moment.

One of their findings was pretty telling. “About 70 percent of people go into a dialogue thinking that they are pretty good listeners, but only about 30 percent feel that they are heard and understood.”

Clearly there is a disconnect.

What is critically important in these kind of questions is curiosity. Rather than attacking people and their positions, when we can ask questions that help us understand people better, then we can continue to learn and grow.

Asking questions like: “What experiences in your life do you think lead you to this belief?” or my favorite old standby “can you tell me more about that?”

Reflecting back what you have heard, “Let me see if I understand what you are saying... is that right?”

In a recent interview Parisa said: “We have found that these conversations don’t make people compromise or weaken their positions,” she said. What they can do “is foster respect and affection where once we had seen an adversary.”

Now I want to be clear. This is not to say that compromise is always good. Or that we should just meet in the middle.

Too many of the political issues of our moment are actually deeply moral issues, and actual human lives are at stake, not just ideas.

I am not suggesting that any of us back down from our moral clarity, especially when we are defending the vulnerable, and giving voice to the voiceless.

What I am suggesting is that we all exercise a little more intellectual humility. And admit to ourselves and one another that we do not hold a perfectly clear understanding of our incredibly complex world.

I would like us all to be able to admit our limitedness without feeling like it weakens our ability to stand up for what we believe in.

And more importantly, we all need to stop jumping so suddenly to assuming we understand the motivations of those who disagree with us, or who see the world in starkly different terms.

We all just need to remember to listen. And to ask questions. To be able to be curious.

If God could not be human without begin curious, neither can we.

I often approach the paradox of Jesus' humanity and divinity by thinking of it this way.

Jesus is showing us the most godly form of a human life. Jesus is showing us what God's infinite love looks like when it is inserted into the finitude of our world.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus asked 307 questions.

By contrast, he is asked 187 questions.

And he directly answers 3.

So perhaps what God is showing us, is that the most godly form of human life is one with unmistakable moral clarity, but in which questions and curiosity are more important than certainty.

Where in fact the hearts of others are more easily moved when they are listened to, rather than when they are lectured at.

And where the capacity to wonder, rather than the ability to know, is the greatest gift our minds possess.