

*Grant us to love you with our whole hearts (opening prayer)*

Mark's Gospel has slowly been building up around Jesus the aura of authority. He teaches with authority, he heals with authority, he chooses people, and they drop everything to follow. Large crowds gather to him, even when he is compelled to live outside town because of their numbers which threaten to overwhelm him. He gives orders to the sea and the wind, and they obey him.

What's surprising about this authority is that it seems effortless, and is exercised in peace. There have been many powerful people in the world's history. But their acquisition of power has always been at someone else's expense, and their exercise of it has been opposed, and eventually their power is taken from them by their enemies. Jesus isn't like that. His authority isn't something he has to fight for, and he shows no inclination to accept the protection of anyone else: remember his firm refusal of Peter's sword in the Garden of Gethsemane. When his disciples want to hang round his neck a powerful title, even a religious one, he refuses it; because whatever name people dream up for him will be a misunderstanding. He exercises an authority which is not of this world, and therefore he will accept no worldly explanation of it.

The human world has many struggles in it, many paths to power. Jesus does not walk in any of them. When they come to take him by force and make him King, he runs away. When they call him Christ, he silences them. And yet he is undeniably, and wonderfully, human: he has about him so deep a humanity that people can't resist his attraction. So who is this person: too divine to bear a human title, too human to be resisted?

We really have to get rid of the idea of a human God. The God who is just a very massive human being in the sky, an almighty King or an omniscient inventor, is incredible and doesn't exist. We must stop ourselves from thinking about this monster-idol, because God is indeed quite different from it; and those who decide they can't believe in that idol are right. We shouldn't let people think *we* believe in it either, because in that way we will be giving people a wrong choice. We've been doing this for centuries, allegedly to protect those sainted souls, "the simple faithful". All it has done is bring down on us the likes of Professor Dawkins, who thinks all theology is "simple" bunk. In this he shows that, whatever his gifts as a scientist - I'm unfit to judge - he himself is a historical and theological cretin. But we deserve him. We've set ourselves up as his target.

The Bishops, the Popes, and the Theologians all know that God is not human, but unlike us in nearly every possible way. He is not born and does not die. He needs nothing and wants nothing. He is completely self-sufficient. He does not suffer variation, he has no good days and no bad days. He is eternal and knows it. He does not feel emotions, he does not make decisions, he does not have thoughts or ideas. He is not at the mercy of a body, and he does not speak or act as we know speech and activity. Inhuman? *Not half.*

It is because of all these things that the Son of God is born as a human being. Don't think little of that. It doesn't mean that *an already human God* steps down a few pegs and changes places, as you might conclude from certain pictures of the Ascension. This is what the first reading says when God promises to speak to us in our own language. His Word becomes our flesh. This is a very exciting experience, because in him we see that fulness we've always wanted: there's a space in us - perhaps I should say *an open door* - which we've never satisfactorily filled, and Jesus knows what it means. It is the place where he meets the eternal Father.

That open door is a draughty presence, and we're all too ready to slam it shut. You may not like to use the language of the Bible, about possession by demons. Those who do adopt this

way of speech often turn out to be superstitious souls who like to invent mythic dimensions to live their lives in, as if our three-score years and ten could benefit from a stage setting, like *Lord of the Rings*. But we put much more mundane things up to close that opening: our own selfish plans, or our possessions or achievements, or the people we want to love, or the things we enjoy. It never works, because we always underestimate our dimensions - just as we always underestimate God. All these fakes and substitutes stand between us and God. Sometimes their influence becomes truly demonic: destructive, life-denying, immovable.

Like you, I've had my demons, and still have them. Some of them have been driven out. Others remain, and I know I'm divided in mind about their departure. This is what I see in Jesus Christ: the power over my demons, the power to detonate my idols, the authority to blast open the narrow, or half-opened, door that leads to faith, hope, and love. So when this quiet, peaceful, forgiving man comes to sit beside me and speaks to me, I uncurl and relax before his humanity: but the demons tremble within me, and I am like a patient before the surgeon. I know I have to decide whether to let him in - or leave things as they are. Both options taste of death to me. But one of them leads to life.