

Genesis 2:8-25  
Mark 14:32-36  
Romans 5:12-19

## JESUS & ADAM

Struggling formally with the identity of Jesus, the church came up with a formula (around 325 A.D.) which has proved to be the best we can do so far. It claims that Jesus is “fully God” *and* “fully man.” That is gibberish, of course. It formalizes a paradox that nobody can understand – mixes the unmixable – and then claims it to be the truth. Yet this gibberish points to the mystery of Jesus’ identity better than anything else we have come up with. It is not possible to think about Jesus for more than a few seconds without starting to err against one side of that formula or the other. And that is exactly where we need to leave it – baffled but radiant. We cannot get Jesus into a box. We are constantly trying to make Him too holy to be relevant, or too human to be our Savior.

Because Jesus is so unique, we sometimes want to honor Him by thinking that no earthly influence could have influenced or shaped His life. But if that were so, then He is fully God, and not man at all. One of the most obvious things about us humans is that we are so greatly influenced by parents, teachers, friends, circumstances, and experiences. If that is not true of Jesus, then what have we to do with Him? What manner of understanding can there be between Him and us?

Speaking very personally, I began to realize some years ago that I am not moved very much by Jesus’ divinity. I am convinced of it – I believe it – but it has minimal impact upon me. What reaches me – what moves me – is watching Jesus the human being – immersed in all the issues, limitations, feelings, and desires of a human being – and then watching what He does with that – seeing how He reacts and decides and responds to it all.

For me, it is watching how Jesus lives that makes me conclude that He was unique – that He was Messiah, Savior, Son of God. He does not DO life like we do – at least not like I do. While many people did not like Him or His Way – even ended up His enemies, a thing I understand all too easily – I nevertheless end up believing that He lived His life better, higher, truer, and more beautifully than any

other human being who ever came here. And when I can no longer find adequate human motive or explanation for that, well, my soul knows it is time to posit God. Convictions of divinity are forced upon me not by trying to think of Jesus as divine, but by trying to comprehend Him as merely human.

And so, though I know I am in the numerical minority, I am not much impressed by the many ways that “institutional” Christianity tries to indoctrinate or instill within us the conviction that Jesus is divine. To conclude such a thing to begin with – because it is handed to us as a thing we are supposed to believe – and then trying to get real about it afterward seems to me to be at the root of all hypocrisy and play-acting. I keep wondering why so many thousands of Christians can *believe* in the Divinity of Christ – can *believe* in the Virgin Birth, the Trinity, the sacraments, the correct theological formulas, and the holiness of the Bible – yet it has such minuscule impact on how they make their personal decisions, or on what they are living for or how they are living for it. Getting belief ahead of conviction – putting creed before spiritual experience – is the most devastating form of putting the cart before the horse. Actually, it ends up being a cart without any horse at all. It goes nowhere. So all over the world, we have these beautiful creeds sitting around but no power to drive them. They just sit there looking pretty but get us nowhere.

So how did Jesus begin to acquire His strange reputation in the first place? Certainly He did not start out with it. Yes, of course, people spent time with Him, watched Him, got more and more intrigued by Him ... until they began to follow Him around. And when they had done that for a while, they began to realize that they could not put Him into any of the categories they were familiar with. I smile when the disciples get together, after some event or teaching, and say quietly to each other: “Did you see that! Who is this?! What’s going on here? *What manner of man is this?*” (Matthew 8:29) So, quietly, one, and then another, and then another ... they *came to believe*. They did not *try* to believe; nobody told them they were *supposed* to believe. *They came to believe*: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

Jesus’ impact on people who come to believe this way is so enormous that we call it conversion – transformation. Life cannot stay the same for people who truly begin to see it in a different light. So I

keep thinking the church will wake up someday and stop trying to *make* people believe. We need to do what Jesus' early friends did: get to know Him, watch Him, go around with Him for a while ... until our souls begin to recognize that He does not fit into any of our categories – until we feel impossible things connecting. Then it will not matter how exactly the creeds are worded – nothing will be able to keep us from following Him into His different WAY of Life.

In this same vein, whether you follow the logic or not, I want to talk just a little bit over the next few Sundays about Jesus' connection to His Jewish heritage. I am convinced that Jesus did not realize His own identity or destiny until after His own baptism – His own conversion. Doubtless many things had been pushing Him, trying to awaken Him for years. John the Baptist was His spiritual mentor, and the catalyst. In any case, Jesus did not live into His identity and role as Messiah by accident, or automatically, or by following some pre-arranged script. Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish home. Clearly, somewhere along the line He had studied the Old Testament more thoroughly and deeply than His peers. I have long suspected that some skeptical but deeply devout old rabbi spent a lot of time with Jesus in His formative years.

In any case, Jesus was exceedingly well-versed in the Torah, and in the issues and arguments which surrounded it. Torah itself requires that He meditate on it day and night. Subsequent arguments with scribes and priests made it clear that this was exactly what He had done. He had huge regard and admiration for the prophets and, I suspect, for all the heroes of His Jewish tradition. Jesus not only knew the stories, but He had contemplated them in great depth. How else could He have known how to wend His way through all the pressures and demands of His own time, shaping His own movement in such a dramatically different fashion? Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes, John's followers – all wanted Jesus to come into *their* movements. But He knew, for instance, the history of the Maccabees, and He knew their approach could never work in the long run. He knew, in fact, the entire history of Israel, and picked from it what He thought was most valuable and shaped it into a New Covenant – a New Way. That does not *explain* Him. His life and ministry and identity are more than that. But without that part of it, the rest of His story has no rhyme or reason – no connection to our world.

So I want to talk briefly about Jesus' connection to some of His heroes. I will try to give a brief biographical sketch of each and talk a bit about the way some of the themes in the lives of these heroes show up in Jesus' life, and hope you will go on seeing far greater connections between the Old and New Testament stories than you have before.

Adam is the first, and most questionable, connection. But Adam serves as an introduction to the rest, so I will still start there. Adam is not a person. Adam is "mankind." Adam is all of us – and each of us. So how do I do a biographical sketch? Sadly, there are lots of ways in which I can.

The story of Adam is profound, and many-faceted. Some of us have our own special wording and ways to approach the story. People have been arguing over the true significance of Adam for a great many years now – well, for over four thousand years at least. We do not have time for all the niceties this morning, just some of the simplest and most basic parts of his biography.

Adam starts out in an idyllic setting, without a worry in the world. He does not really appreciate his circumstances – he does not realize what a special thing it is that all his physical needs are taken care of. His bliss is not earned or valued. He does not appreciate it because he has nothing to compare it with. He is, in the deepest sense of the word, "innocent." How long can you live in this world and stay innocent? We have different experiences, but all of us are Adam, and the answer is: not for very long.

Whatever the temptation ... whatever the snake ... whatever the wound, or betrayal, or loss, or abuse – the answer is: We cannot stay innocent for very long. We begin to realize that some things are good and pleasant, and other things are painful and evil. The veil of innocence falls from our eyes, and we become aware of the battle between good and evil which rages everywhere in our world – inside and out. "*The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*" is a powerful symbol with endless dimensions, but we will keep it very simple and basic this morning.

On with the biographical sketch: Adam is out of the Garden of Eden. Some say he is "kicked out," but I suspect he doesn't have to move an inch. When we lose innocence, nothing around us looks the

same anymore. Even if Adam is still in the Garden, it doesn't look or seem like a Garden anymore. Everything is frightening. Everything is a problem. Where is the next meal coming from? Are *you* the next meal? How do you keep warm? All the animals are starting to seem unfriendly. Eve has developed headaches and a long list of complaints and things that need fixing. After all, she is now just as frightened as you are. Kids are wonderful, but they bring a whole new set of nightmares: You have to feed them too. And what if they get hurt? What if they don't grow up with the right values and habits? Adam is overwhelmed with his fears, his responsibilities, his opportunities – any of which can suddenly turn on him and leave him worse off than he was before.

Adam is out of the Garden. His life is circumscribed by all the things that can go wrong. He tries not to let this get him down. He tries to pretend he has everything under control. But these fears are real and do not go away. So Adam tries to choose the good, and protect himself against the evil. That is what it means to be Adam – the natural man. As such, Adam is estranged from all the sources and purposes of life. He does not mean to be, but the fear does it anyway. He is estranged, suspicious, alienated. The ancient word for this is SIN. He tries to get into control so he can acquire more good and hold off some of the evil – from himself and all whom he cares about. He works very hard, but that puts him into competition, jealousy, more estrangement – one way or the other. Sometimes Adam gets some appreciation for all his labors, but mostly that is short-lived, mixed with other feelings, or balanced by all the criticism and accusation he gets from other quarters. And usually – we could say *always* – his good efforts are mixed with mistakes, blunders, careless moments. Some of them hurt others. Some of them stay in his memory to mar all the good efforts he makes.

The most profound thing about Adam is that his life is surrounded by what are called “the curses”: misunderstanding or animosity between Adam and God, Adam and nature, Adam and Eve, Adam and his neighbors, Adam and himself. On the individual level, this is struggle, sorrow, pain, guilt, and depression. On the collective level, it is war, poverty, tyranny and oppression, ecological disaster, and racial strife. And sometimes, it gets so subtle or familiar that we do not even realize we are all drowning in it. Then it breaks out in full ugliness somewhere, and we all act as if it were strange, unusual,

unheard of. “What could the parents have been thinking?” “It must have been the influence of bad television.” Like we had never even heard of Adam – or Cain and Abel, or even Noah.

Adam is the Natural Man. He lives with the curses. He doesn't mean to be bad – he doesn't want to do so much damage. Often he works hard and tries hard – and the greater his efforts, the more it all keeps turning against him, because his condition, his context, his situation ... is alienation. He tries to do it his own way, and by himself. I mean, in “alienation,” who do you trust? So the more he strives, the deeper the hole he digs. All of us are Adam. Adam is all of us. *Adam* in Hebrew means “mankind.” Adam is our story. Adam is not an individual who lived long ago. Adam is us.

Jesus starts out being Adam too. He knows the story of Adam and ponders it more deeply than anyone ever did before He came along. And eventually Jesus “mutates” (wrong word, but we need the jolt) – Jesus transcends, converts – from Natural Man to Spiritual Man. Not in or by His own power, let us be clear. *The dove descends* – by *God's* power. But Jesus responds – turns back to God – deeply and totally. Jesus starts to see all the history of His people through new eyes that realize: Adam's way cannot work – not ever – no matter how well he may do it in his best moments. You cannot obey Torah and have it come out right in the long run, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot love your neighbor and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot fight evil and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot have a life full of love and hope and joy, if deep inside you think you are awful, that God hates you, and that soon now you will be punished or destroyed. Even total devotion – total allegiance to God – will still invert on us, if we are still the Natural Man.

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit”* – those who know their absolute need of God. Turn will and life over to God – stop trying to run life your own way. Take all of your ambitions and values out of this natural realm. So Jesus, unlike many of His followers, has no prejudices against the poor *or* the rich. That would only be the Natural Man in reverse. He does not have to win here – not in any of the ways we normally care about. He does not see people in terms of the plots or subplots of the Natural World and its curses. He sees them as children of God, yet hurt and in bondage – to sin, death, and the Devil.

I wish and long to tell *all* the stories that illustrate the genius of Jesus. Clearly it would have taken a theophany – a major religious experience, a conversion – to make the interior changes to support the outer convictions that Jesus demonstrates and reveals in His earthly ministry. The story of Adam is the great “stuck place” of all human life. Jesus breaks beyond it. He does not just change the rules; He has a very different relationship with God. It ends up changing all perspective on who God is, who Jesus is, who *we* are, what life is about, what is truly valuable, what methods and approaches are useful in pursuing our true goals. And those are only the *words*, and cannot begin to explain the *feelings* that go with this transformation.

One more piece before we close. Nobody can contemplate connections between Jesus and Adam for very long without noticing the two Gardens: Eden and Gethsemane. How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane?

Eden is Paradise, but mindless. What we do without conscious choice is meaningless and without purpose. We get kicked out of this Garden – forced by pain and reality to see the problem of good and evil. So we take responsibility. Some say that despite being kicked out of Eden – in honor of how nice it was there – we try to stay as mindless and unaware as we can, as much of the time as we can. I guess that really isn't very strange. The reality beyond innocence is too much to handle undiluted. One of the great discoveries, for me, was the realization that you do not have to drink to go through life in a stupor. Sobriety ain't so bad; you just have to learn how to handle it. I meet lots of people more asleep sober than I was drunk.

How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? Nobody can say for sure, but a day came when Jesus walked into that other Garden. There was a tree in that Garden too – the tree of the knowledge of God's Kingdom first. “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength – and him only shall you serve.*” We already had the words. But they do not work from East of Eden – with us still in control and still scared half to death. Willpower is not enough if we are still caught in the Alienation Syndrome – still in SIN.

I know that some people want to think that Jesus was never kicked out of Eden. “Let’s stick with tooth fairies and virgin births and pastel shades,” they say, “and anything to warm the heart, whether it has any meaning or reality or not.” *Nobody* ever travels from Eden to Gethsemane by accident, or innocent of the issues, or unaware of what is at stake. Eden is Paradise, but mindless. Gethsemane is temptation – the ultimate testing – but in total awareness. In Eden, there is no choice. In Gethsemane, choice is the only thing there is.

So Jesus chose – not just in that moment, but as in all others – He chose *again* according to all He had tracked and known and become since His baptism – the awakening – the New LIFE with God. Jesus chose to obey God, against all odds – against all the pressures in and out of this world – but nevertheless because He *wanted* to. No law could require it. No law could even support it. No fear of God could have been motive enough. No coercion can exist in Gethsemane. The choice was as willful as Adam’s, only this time it came in full conscious awareness. “*Nevertheless, not my will but YOUR will be done.*” Eden is innocent, willful, self-centered reaction: I want what I want when I want it. Gethsemane is totally conscious, willful, and willing obedience.

“Lord God, my will bows to Your will.”  
(Not good enough.)

“Lord God, Your will has become my will.”  
(Not true enough.)

“Lord God, above all things – all earthly realities, all truth  
and fear and death – I love and I trust YOU.”  
(God back in first place.)

The two Gardens stand at either side of the full spectrum of LIFE: from rebellion to reconciliation; from instinct to conscious responsibility; from the Natural Man to the Spiritual Man. To go from Eden to Gethsemane is to go from fear to faith ... from innocence to self-awareness ... from pride to humility ... from Law to LOVE. And most of all, it is a choosing to let God be our God again.

Gethsemane is a long way from Eden, and it is often as scary as things can get in this world. But it is the only way out of the curses and into healing, and back to God. How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? In our world, it can sometimes seem strange that

anybody would want to follow Jesus. Do you really think that most of the human race wants to take this Journey? You think Christianity is for everybody, and that if the WAY is not made to sound simple and appealing enough to attract everybody, then something is wrong with the WAY? Oh, it IS for everybody. But it is not for those who need it. It is only for those who want it.

Who would want to take such a Journey? You can never tell for sure. Humans are strange creatures. It might even be somebody like you.

## PRAYER

Thank You, Lord God, for all the unpleasant things of creation. For all the times we try to get away with it, and get caught. For the shame we feel when we do not act like Your people should. For the guilt we suffer when we hurt others. For the pain that warns us we are going in the wrong direction.

Thank You for the fear which reminds us that we are not the highest authority. For the loneliness that makes us seek solace beyond ourselves. For the despair that will not settle for false answers. For all the urgent longings that call us back to life.

We praise You for wanting us to be with You – for giving us no rest or peace or joy until we turn to seek life with You.

Thank You, Lord God, for Your mercy – in all the pleasant and unpleasant things of life. By the grace of Jesus Christ, our Savior, we turn to LIFE with You, praying together as He taught us to, saying, *“Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”*