

## Chapter Ten

### The Jewishness of Jesus

*Purpose:* This teaching is aimed to bring out more fully the reality of the Incarnation, that God truly took human flesh and became a real man. This means that in the Incarnation God entered human history, was born of a human mother in this place at this point in time, acquiring human ancestors and belonging to a particular family, a particular tribe (Judah) and a particular people (Israel). I.e the Son of God became a real man. We often miss this when we talk abstractly of the Incarnation, or of God just taking human form.

*Presentation:* This presentation needs to follow the teaching on the election of Israel, otherwise the significance of Jesus becoming an Israelite and a Jew cannot be properly appreciated. But this teaching comes before the teachings on Jesus as the Suffering Servant, who becomes our Saviour and Redeemer. As this is also a teaching on the human identity of Jesus, it is an important foundation for the later teachings on our identities before God.

### The Human Identity of Jesus

It is very significant that the New Testament begins with a clear declaration of the human identity of Jesus: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1: 1). Matthew is the synoptic gospel directly addressed to a church still having a strong Jewish component. The rest of Chapter 1 demonstrates the statement made in the first verse. Both points are significant. To say that Jesus is son of David is laying the ground for his being the long-awaited Messiah and Saviour of his people. This point is made later in the chapter: “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (Matt. 1: 16) and then “she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matt. 1: 21) To say that Jesus is son of Abraham is to say that he belongs to the chosen people according to the promise. The fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham features in the two songs of Mary and of Zechariah in the first chapter of Luke (see Luke 1: 54 - 55; 72 - 73). So from the start of the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus is a Jew and an Israelite.

Interestingly it is Luke who makes the point more than once that Joseph and Mary were very conscientious in fulfilling the requirements of the law of Moses in regard to their first-born son, Jesus (see Luke 2: 22, 27, 39, 42): note especially: “And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord” (Luke 2: 39). So Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day after his birth as all other Jewish male infants, so becoming fully one of God’s chosen covenant people.

It is in Matthew’s infancy gospel that we have the story of the “wise men from the East” (the biblical text in Matt. 2 does not mention kings) who come to Jerusalem asking “Where is he who is born king of the Jews?” (Matt. 2: 2). And it is no accident that near the end of the gospel, we are told of the title nailed to the cross above Jesus: “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” (Matt. 27: 37). John has the protest of the chief priests, who argue that it should read: “This man said, ‘I am king of the Jews’.” (John 19: 21). But Pilate refuses, saying, “What I have written I have written.” (John 19: 22). The truth remains: Jesus is the Messiah, son of David, the king of Israel.

When Herod discovers that the wise men have not returned to Jerusalem as he sought, he is furious and reveals his duplicity. Just as Pharaoh ordered the killing of all male Israelite babies at birth, so Herod orders the slaughter of all male children in Bethlehem under two years of age. Just as the life of Moses was saved, the one who would lead Israel out of

Egypt, so the life of Jesus is saved, the one who will lead his people and all peoples out of slavery into life. This episode in the infancy of Jesus was to be a recurring theme in the life of Israel. Hatred and jealousy of the Jews leads to attempts to exterminate the whole people, as with Haman in the book of Esther and with Hitler in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The finding of the boy Jesus in the temple also demonstrates his rootedness in the life of Israel.

### The Baptism of Jesus

To fully understand the baptism of Jesus, it is necessary to understand its totally Jewish context. The baptism of John is for the people of Israel. John says, "I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." (John 1: 31). John called the people of Israel to repentance and his baptism was a baptism of repentance (see Luke 3: 3). So how can Jesus who is sinless ask for a baptism of repentance. John recognized how seemingly odd was this request. "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (Matt. 3: 14). But Jesus insists, saying: "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." (Matt. 3: 15). What does this mean? The restoration of righteousness/ justice is the task of the Messiah-Saviour, first in Israel and then in the nations. So it is said of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah: "He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth" (Is. 42: 4). In this way we can see that by accepting baptism from the hands of John Jesus is accepting his coming death for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of righteousness. The fourth servant song brings out this redemptive role: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed." (Is. 53: 5). But who are the "us"? A later verse makes clear that "we", "our" and "us" refer to the people of Israel and their sins: "he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people" (Is. 53: 8).

The New Testament makes clear that in the Incarnation, Jesus became truly man. "The Word became flesh" (John 1: 14). The Epistle to the Hebrews makes this very clear: "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature" (Heb. 2: 14). He became like unto us in everything except sin. See Heb. 2: 14 - 18; 4: 15. What the baptism of Jesus by John shows is that Jesus not only identified with his people in his conception, birth and circumcision, but he identified with them also in their sin. Jesus, who was without sin, identified himself with his people in all their sin and their sinfulness. Only thus could he deal with the sin and be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Paul's description sounds extreme, but is profound: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5: 21).

### The Mission of Jesus

The mission of Jesus before his death and resurrection is only to the house of Israel. It is clear that he chooses twelve apostles because there are twelve tribes of Israel. So, Jesus assures them: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt. 19: 28; see also Rev. 21: 12, 14). So, when Jesus calls the Twelve and sends them out, he instructs them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10: 5 - 6). Jesus had a strong sense of his calling from the Father: "I must

preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose,” (Luke 4: 43).

The strong sense of Jesus for complete obedience to his Father is shown clearly in the episode with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Remarkably this woman cries out in recognition of the Messiah of Israel: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” (Matt. 15: 22). Even then, Jesus first refuses her request, saying: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt. 15: 24). As she persists, Jesus seems to answer her harshly: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (Matt. 15: 26). At this point the bread is for the children of Israel. But she replies with extraordinary simplicity: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (Matt. 15: 27). However one interprets this response, it is a recognition of the first place of Israel. Jesus is so impressed by her faith, seeing in her the work of God that he relents and grants her request.

It is only after the death and resurrection of Jesus that the mission to the nations begins. It is after the resurrection that Jesus says to the twelve: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28: 19 - 20).

### The Identity of the Risen Jesus

We might think that the identity of the risen Jesus is simply that He is Lord. The apostle Peter announces to the assembled Jews on the day of Pentecost: “Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2: 36). However, it does not fit with God’s ways of working that through his resurrection Jesus loses his human identity as a Jew and Israelite, as son of David and son of Abraham and become a kind of generic man. It is part of New Testament faith that the humanity of Jesus has been assumed for ever. He is not just man for the duration of his earthly life. In heavenly glory, Jesus is fully God and fully man, being constituted as high priest to plead his blood, once shed on the cross, for all sinners.

Jesus remains a Jew and an Israelite in his risen and ascended life, because God always saves and delivers what He has created - here the humanity of Jesus - and God does not change who we are when we enter into his glory. So in the book of Revelation, one of the elders in John’s vision tells him: “Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Rev. 5: 5). In the glory of the coming kingdom, every person will be purified from all defilement and will be confirmed in his/her most basic identity. At the beginning, God saw all that He had made, and it was good. At the final restoration, God sees everything that He has made and that has been purified through the blood of Jesus, and fills all with His Holy Spirit, so that it is not just good but totally holy.

### Appendix to this Teaching

There is a profound teaching on the infancy narratives in the book *The Promise* by Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the son of Jewish immigrants to France who was baptized, ordained a priest and later became the archbishop of Paris. The cardinal wrote of the coming of the wise men from the East: “The coming of the pagans provokes the killing of the Messiah.” (p. 56). “The figure of the Messiah is at the same time the figure of Israel; the figure of Jesus is at the same time that of his people, of the Church and of Israel. ... Many things can only be understood by this solidarity of Jesus with his own, of the Messiah with

his people.” (p. 57). “The evangelist presents Jesus as sharing the lot of the children of Bethlehem. ... He shares in the exodus and the exile of Israel, fleeing into Egypt and returning, so anticipating the mystery of his own passion. At the other end of the gospel, St Matthew shows us the fulfilment of the prophecies when on the cross another pagan names Jesus as king of the Jews” (pp. 56 - 57).

Lustiger also reflected on the sin of Herod. “The sin of Herod ... is his refusal to recognize what is presented as ‘good news’: the grace given to Israel. The sin of Herod is to refuse the Election of Israel and substituting himself. The king given by God is his enemy; he appears as someone who installed himself as king and who has usurped the place of God over the people, as the fundamental enemy. ... The sin of Herod, the sin of the pagans, is to refuse the Election of Israel, because the Election appears to them to be a deadly threat” (p. 51).

#### Discussion Points

1. Why is it important for our salvation that Jesus has a fully human identity as a Jew and an Israelite?
2. How does the solidarity/identification of Jesus with his own people make him also the Saviour of the world?
3. Why is it important that Jesus is glorified in this human identity that he took on when he became man?