



Advent 1

THE NEW SHOFAR

all those who flee to Him for salvation can take new courage... now they can know without doubt that he will give them the salvation he has promised them. Hebrews 6:18

Jesus lived as one of us, with all the angsts of being human

In the verse before our Gospel reading begins, Jesus declares... ³*'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* Is there anything that stands out in this text that makes you sit back and ponder about what this says about Jesus? One insight in which I rejoice is the way Jesus says there is something **he does not know!** In an age that professes to have an inside run on all truth, I find it refreshing to hear Jesus say there are things only His Father knows. I was brought up on the old catechism schooling that insisted Jesus could do anything he wanted and he knew everything there was to know. Because he was God and man, there was no other way of stating our faith.

Now this is important theologically for each one of us. A Jesus who walked through the world knowing exactly what the next day would bring, knowing with certainty that three days after his death his Father would raise him up, is a Jesus who can arouse our admiration, but still a Jesus far from us. He is a Jesus far from humankind, from people who can only hope in the future and believe in God's goodness; far from a humankind that must face the supreme uncertainty of death with faith but without knowledge of what is beyond.

Jesus struggled with all the uncertainties of being human – thank God

A Jesus for whom the future was as much a mystery, a dread, and a hope as it is for us and yet, at the same time a Jesus who would say, *Not my will but yours* – this is a Jesus who can effectively teach us how to live, for this is a Jesus who would have gone through life's real trials. It is only then we would know the full truth of the saying: *No man can have greater love than this: to lay down his life for those he loves* for we know that he laid down his life with all the agony with which we lay it down. We would know that for him the loss of life was, as it is for us, the loss of a great possession, a possession that is outranked only by love.

What we do not ponder enough is that becoming human really meant fully human. To deny the human reality misses the point as badly as denying the divine reality. But it is not just about knowledge. He was both tired and hungry, and would need a rest from time to time (John 4:6). Jesus, like his contemporaries, could not imagine what an electric train was like, or a motor car, or an aeroplane. That he needed to learn new things (Luke 2:52) and could be surprised (Matthew 8:10). The shock we may feel at this realisation was also known to the first Christians. For them it was the Great Nazareth Scandal. Nazareth was,

after all, the most innocuous of hamlets, a tiny village with at most 20 houses, as archaeology has shown. Remember the doubt expressed by Phillip: *What good can come from Nazareth?*! Change *Nazareth* to *from me* and have an insight into the power of what God was doing.

Our limitations turn us to a deeper faith and hope in God

He would have picked up the Hebrew alphabet, like most boys in religious families, so that he could take his turn in reading Scripture (Luke 4:16) but Hebrew was a foreign language to him (and he did not speak King James English). He had an uncouth Galilean accent (John 7:52); his Galilean temper would flare up on occasion (Mark 3:5; Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:12-14). He even made mistakes: saying Abiathar was high priest when David ate of the consecrated loaves (Mark 2:26), but in the first Book of Samuel the high priest at the time was Abimelech. Abiathar only became high priest afterwards (22:20-23).

Jesus was, of course, intelligent and did receive special revelations from the Father (Luke 10:22). As a human being he was not all-knowing. He was not, as the Docetic heretics maintained during the first centuries, a divine ghost using human nature as a mask. In order to become fully human, God the Son had to *empty himself*. He had to give up, as it were, his divine powers, such as omnipotence, omniscience, immortality. This leads us to the all-important question: Why would God do a thing like this?

The answer is mind blowing. He did it *for us human beings, for us and for our salvation*. Not for God's own glory. Not because he needed to do so, but simply for us, because he loved us and he wanted to heal us from within, as a member of the human race, as one of us.

We know in faith that Jesus is God, and when we pray to him now as the risen Christ, we can speak to him in any language, including English. But does it not give us more confidence when we approach him, to know that he knows our human weakness from his own experience? Our searching, our confusion, our cry of anguish, and as Hebrews 4:15 proclaims so beautifully that *he is not a high priest unable to sympathise with our weakness, but one who has been tested in every way as we are, only without sin* (Hebrews 4:15).

Advent: a call to acknowledge our spiritual vulnerability

This witness by Jesus reminds us of the need to grow in hope, a hope that is more than a desire or a wish from something to happen. Christian hope is an expectation with certainty that God will do all he has promised, it is a grace founded on the gift of faith and that *faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*. We have hope because we have faith. What we can sometimes fail to do is to build this gift of hope into each and every human circumstance. ¹⁷*God also bound himself with an oath, so that those he promised to help would be perfectly sure and never need to wonder whether he might change his plans...*¹⁹ *This certain hope of being saved is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls, connecting us with God himself behind the sacred curtains of heaven...* Ensuring we grow in this hope is our greatest

Advent challenge, for by living in hope we are always ready for the coming of Jesus, whether that means Him being with us in what is unfolding in the present, His coming at Christmas or His return at the End of time.

For that hope to be real and transformative, we must imitate the witness of Jesus born to us as son of Mary and Joseph, a man of his own time who illustrated how our vulnerabilities, once embraced, give us the certain hope of ***Immanuel*** – God with us.