

Recently a friend posed a question relating to the story of the palsied man lowered through the roof in Capernaum (Mt 9:1-8), and specifically to Jesus' offer of forgiveness in that pericope. Basically, the question had to do with the apparent incongruity of a *man* offering forgiveness. The question included the suggestion (rejected by the interrogator) that in that act of forgiveness, Jesus acted only in His deity and not in His humanity. The question broached some issues that I encounter now and again, and which I believe are worthy of clarification. Thus I have waxed bold to record my response in this place.

First, we would all concur that in His incarnation – in taking upon Himself all of the real limitations intrinsic to unfallen humanity – Jesus never surrendered anything of His deity. Thus, though fully man, the God-Man Jesus was fully God, and thus could (and did) claim for Himself the sublime prerogative of forgiving sins. Indeed, that is the point of the narrative in Mt 9:1-8. The record is explicit that it was “...in order that [Jesus' detractors] might know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” that “He said to the sick of palsy, ‘Get up, pick up your bed, and go home!’” In short, though He was man very man, Jesus knew full well that He was God very God, and thus that even “on earth” He possessed the authority to forgive those who believed.

There is in close connection to that the legitimate and ultimately perplexing question of Jesus' *discovery* of His own person. Indeed, whatever there is of mystery in the Person of Jesus grows just a bit deeper in this connection. (Within the broader field of Christology, this question is a rubric unto itself; the issue is known as the Messianic Consciousness of Jesus, and there is a small mountain of literature which struggles with it.) My considered but somewhat loosely held persuasion is that the boy Jesus did indeed *grow into* an understanding of Himself, which would have included (most dramatically, one would think) His unique Theanthropic person. The primary reason for that persuasion is simply that for all I can possibly tell, such a process is in the truest sense *intrinsic to humanness*. To say it another way, it is not accidental or incidental to the human experience to be born a helpless infant who must grow into the experience of personal self-consciousness and self-awareness. And thus if Jesus' humanity was full and genuine, it must have included that dynamic. In this regard, many have identified the experience in the temple at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41-52) as the moment when the boy Jesus' self-awareness finally matured, but I am persuaded that it happened at a much younger age than that: His mother Mary must have cradled Him in her

arms when He was very young and told Him of the wondrous circumstances and events attendant upon His nativity; His mind was entirely untouched and uncrippled by sin, and thus the corruption of fallenness – whatever that is in its noetic expression – did not hinder His apprehension or appreciation of the truth concerning who He had become; the fact that He was unpolluted by the Adamic nature in body and spirit surely set Him apart from all His fellows and siblings in ways noticeable to all, but especially to Himself; and His evident hunger for His Father’s recorded Word would have brought Him face-to-face with those passages which anticipate One who was to be “the Branch of the LORD” *and* “the fruit of the earth” (Isa 4:2).

There are those who, in an effort to deal with this specific element of the mystery of Jesus’ person, have suggested that during the period of His gestation and infancy another entirely spiritual (i.e., non-material and extra-mundane) divine entity, consistently identified and denominated as “the Logos,” was somehow operating consciously and independently of the kenotic entity who was the embryo/baby Jesus. But that seems to me to be an entirely neo-platonic expediency which violates the concept of two natures, *one person* – which concept, though Nicene, nonetheless accurately represents the teaching of Scripture concerning Jesus. I think it is wiser to acknowledge and embrace the bottomless mystery that inheres in the biblical truth that “the Word became flesh” (one of those “secret things” which belong to God), to bow the knee to all that the Scriptures clearly reveal concerning the person of Jesus (i.e., those realities which “stand revealed” and thus “belong to us and our children forever”), and then to allow our soul/spirits to gasp anew at the reality that before there was a God-Man there was a God-Boy, and before there was a God-Boy there was a God-Infant, and before there was a God-Infant there was a God-Embryo!

To return to the question at hand, I would insist that although it is most likely that Jesus had to *grow* into self-consciousness, He certainly lived out His adult life – and thus the entire ministry recorded in the Gospels – fully and functionally conscious of who He was, of the remarkable distinctiveness of His person, and of the prerogatives which He possessed because of who He was. Thus there is in Jesus’ act of forgiveness nothing inconsistent with the biblical data concerning His person, and nothing incoherent or incongruous given those data.

Second, I am leery of the notion that Jesus’ act of forgiving the paralytic’s sins might be isolated to His deity, as opposed to His

humanity. With all of the discussion whether Jesus had one will or two – discussion that profits little in my opinion – I think it best simply to acknowledge that the *one* person, Jesus of Nazareth, God come in the flesh, *always acted as one person*. He did not sometimes act as God and other times as man; indeed, there was no sense in which He could act or think or desire or *die* or do anything else except as *the God-man*. And that God-man was just that – very God and very (unfallen) man. It was the genuinely Theanthropic and thus entirely unique Jesus who pronounced forgiven the sins of that palsied man in Capernaum. Thus, the issue is not whether it is possible that *man* might have the prerogative to forgive sins (which he does not and cannot); it is whether *the God-man* has such a prerogative. To make the same point from a more theological perspective, there is no sense in which, in His incarnation, Jesus was anything *less* than unfallen man; there is a profound and transcendent sense in which, even in His incarnation, Jesus was *more* than unfallen man. The *man* Jesus laid claim to divine prerogatives, and thus to *divine identity*, when He pronounced that man’s sins forgiven, and He demonstrated beyond all gainsaying the truth of that mind-numbing claim by the miracle of healing He performed upon the man’s atrophied limbs. Thus did this One who was unmistakably and genuinely *man* prove His claim to be *God*.

There is mystery in this – mystery which we have had 2000 years to get accustomed to, and which we tend to under-appreciate in terms of its ultimate inscrutability and its transcendent majesty. In that regard, my fear is that the notion that this or that act of Jesus can be isolated to His humanity or His deity may represent an attempt to reduce the mystery inherent in the biblical revelation of His person – an attempt by finite man to “unscrew the inscrutable,” to define the dynamics of who Jesus was in a way more palatable and comprehensible than the Gospel record carefully considered will bear. To be sure, the attempt is almost always unintentional, but I would argue that it is wrong-headed nonetheless. God has been well pleased to set before the generations the mystery of the One who was and is, at once, the Son of Man *and* the Son of God – the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. The mandate given every generation is simply to embrace that mystery in all of its parts, to bow the knee to all that stands revealed, and to offer wondering worship to that One “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting,” and who late in time has become our near-kinsman in order that He might be our Redeemer.