Catholicism 101

Topic 2: Who is Jesus?

The last topic made the point clear that God must always and at all times be one. Yet, Christians believe that Jesus is God. This conflicts with the notion of God as one. In order to both understand the person of Jesus, the conflict that arose, and how the Christians came to understand Jesus as God, we need to begin by exploring a rather important topic of faith: revelation. After exploring the topic of revelation, we will explore who Jesus is and how the revelation of Jesus as God changed our understanding of God.

Revelation:

What is Revelation?

The word revelation means to unveil or make something known. Since God is greater that our intellect and imagination, as discussed last time, our knowledge of him must be revealed. We cannot grasp through philosophy all the aspects of the nature of God nor his entire plan of salvation. In a similar way we need many of the most critical aspects of God to be made known to us through revelation like God's desire for us, God as love, and that God wants a relationship with us. Revelation is the process through which God makes known to us aspects of his life or knowledge of creation.

How does revelation work?

This question is heavily nuanced and very complicated. Often we mistake revelation as something "made up" or reduce revealed truths of a faith to human intuition or desire. With so many faith traditions claiming revelation as part of their faith, we can easily dismiss the importance of revelation to mere human desire. Yet we have examples of revelation or experiences beyond the normal scope of our human experiences. Common examples are apparitions or major events. During these times God changes the order of nature or does something extraordinary to make his point known and to draw our attention to the new information he is revealing. The best examples of these moments come from the Bible. The Bible is full of situations and events in which people encountered God and wrote those experiences down as a way to help others to encounter and understand God and his ways.

The process of taking a revelation and turning it into a teaching of faith is far more complicated. As you could guess, it would be easy for someone to claim that God revealed something to her when in reality she was faking it. How do we determine what is from God and what is concocted by humans? This process is called discernment. Discernment is the process by which we take a experience of God or a matter of faith and prayer and reflect upon it to understand God's will. This can be a simple issue like "should I take this job" or "how do I care for my friend" to something like I got this sense from God or a revelation from God and we need to understand it.

The Church over the past 2000 years has developed an incredible system for determine God's will and what is truly revealed from God. After reflecting on the mystery of God, and most notably the revelation of God in Jesus, the Church developed a core theology from which she

discerns the authenticity of revelation. If the person is claiming a revelation from God that conflicts with the theological tradition of the Church on matters of Church teachings called dogmas, the revelation is false. If, however, the revelation conflicts on a matter of practice or expression, these are taken more seriously. The Church, in her wisdom, has the time to wait. The principles of waiting and obedience are critical in this process. God is patient and also wants us to know his will. Therefore, if we dismiss the revelation and wait to see what happens, God will continue to make it clear to us. If we dismiss it and the revelation goes away, then it wasn't from God. Similarly, if the church leaders ask for the person to do something to prove the revelation in obedience and the person refuses, the Church will not listen. If the person responds in obedience, God will provide the proof.

Remember:

1. God wants us to know his ways; he will make them known. We have nothing to fear from both obedience and even ignoring him.
2. God is truth so everything he does must be consistent throughout the entire body of revelation about God.
3. God must make sense. He cannot be in contradiction or shown in such a way that he is logically inconsistent.

Jesus

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is a man from the region of Galilee in Israel who wandered through the land of Israel proclaiming the Kingdom of God. You may be off put by my description of Jesus. Any good Christian would claim that Jesus is God. Strangely, Jesus rarely declared himself as God, which is why I didn't put it in the description. He wanted other people to realize that he is God and come to believe in him. For example, the woman at the well in John chapter 4. The reason why I started the topic of Jesus with revelation is because everything we know about Jesus as God came through revelation. The fact of Jesus as God was not reasoned to, was not the work of some great theologian, or the Church reflecting on Jesus. The fact of Jesus as God came as revealed to those whom God made it known.

So, Jesus is a man, born from Mary of Nazareth, into the society and culture of 1st century Israel. He underwent the normal customs of a Jewish man and lived the life of a Jewish man who was born into the kingly tribe of David and the priestly tribe of Aaron. His family faithfully followed all the precepts of the law and dutifully lived the faith until the age of 30 (number based on tradition not biblical sources). At this pivotal age Jesus began wandering around the land of Israel proclaiming a baptism by repentance and that the kingdom of God is at hand. He formed a band of 12 disciples and countless other followers who listened to his words and were deeply affected by his teachings. Due to some religious disagreements amongst the leaders of the Jews, they condemned him to death for blasphemy, since he claimed that he was God. He was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead.

Upon the resurrection everything changed. The Christians knew that something was different and that the words of Jesus were true. Not just that the kingdom of God was coming and that people could receive forgiveness from their sins but that Jesus is God. Thus those who wrote the four Gospels, and the many other gospel-like texts, indicated through their choice of stories that Jesus is God.

Over the course of Christianity, many have asked the question "who is Jesus?" Beyond the historical figure of a 1st century man who lived in Israel, Jesus was a major figure in various ways.

As a preacher: Out of all the ways we can understand Jesus, this one is the most obvious. Jesus traveled all over Israel, and often into other countries surrounding Israel, to preach the message of God's salvation. He often preached to large groups who wanted to hear him, he preached in synagogues and in the Temple, he preached to small groups like his disciples, and he preached to anyone who would listen. Much of Jesus' life focused on preaching the messages of God.

As a prophet: During Jesus' time, prophets and prophesy were common. Prophets were people who spoke on behalf of God or gave insights to the people about God's will or the effects of their actions. Prophets were revered but also disliked since they generally preached messages that the people didn't like. Jesus was regarded as a prophet during his time. He spoke on behalf of God and made known to the people God's will.

As a religious leader: the most obvious characteristic of Jesus is as a religious leader. Not only was he a rabbi and a teacher of the Jewish faith but he was also a person who expanded the common understanding of Judaism and challenged the religious leaders of his time.

As a military leader: One of the prophesies of the messiah indicated that the messiah would be a kind of military leader. Prevalent Jewish thought of the 1st century taught that the messiah would conquer the Romans and free Israel so that they could return to the kingdom as in the time of David. Evidence throughout the Gospels indicate that many people thought that Jesus was going to lead an army and conquer the Romans once and for all. Oddly, this rarely happens throughout Jewish history. God is more likely to use some strange and unexpected source to free his people than a war. Yet, Jesus was a military leader. He conquered the forces of evil freeing us from sin and death and giving us the ability to fight the Devil and win.

As king of Israel: another prophesy of the Messiah was that he would take over the kingship of David and become the new king. Major events like Jesus' entry into Jerusalem indicated this hope for a new king and a new kingdom. Even Jesus indicated several times that he is a king a of new kingdom. Yet, he is. He is the king of the everlasting kingdom foretold through the prophesies of the Old Testament.

All of these qualities are critical for understanding the revelation of Jesus as both messiah and God. In order for God to fulfill his promise, he had to actually fulfil them, namely in the ministry of his Son. If Jesus didn't fulfill these prophesies, then God lied to his people and Jesus cannot be the messiah.

Why does Jesus matter?

The revelation of Jesus as God is quite a shock. Not only does this revelation seem to conflict with the notion that God is one, but it also meant that the infinite, bodiless, timeless God came into time, became human, died, and is now finite. How can God do that? To fully answer these issues we have to address them piece by piece.

Through revelation we know that Jesus is God. This teaching of the faith is central to Christianity and considered infallible, it cannot be wrong. But what does this mean? Some tried to make the point that Jesus isn't God but merely looks like him. Others tried to prove that Jesus is God but merely looks human. The Church declared that Jesus is 100% human and 100% God. He is completely God and completely human. Not half-and-half, not a weird mixture of the two, but completely both. Jesus, the God-man, not only reveals himself as God, but is God. God now has a human face, God has eyes to see, God lived among us and did the things we did. God now relates to us on a totally new level, as a human.

The question of "how can God do that?" doesn't make sense. God can do the impossible, even if we don't get it. The greater reality is that God always intended to do this. In Genesis 1:26 it reads: "Let us make man in *our* own image." God didn't take on a human face, God has always had a human face since he made us in his image. Now that we have seen God face-to-face and God has completely revealed himself, Jesus is now the fullness of all revelation. Everything we need to know about God we can understand through pondering the mystery of God taking on human flesh.

Jesus is important for more than revealing God to us, through his death and resurrection Jesus opened an avenue for forgiveness from sin and an avenue to Heaven. He showed us that God desires more than a following of his laws and precepts, he wants us to love him and to choose him. Jesus fulfilled the laws of the Old Testament and returned them to the core teachings that God desired from the beginning. Only through Jesus can we be saved; only by becoming one with him do we hope for eternal life. We will more fully explain this point later in the series when we talk about sin, forgiveness, heaven, hell and purgatory.

How can Jesus be God if there is only one God?

This question was debated for five centuries before reaching some rather important conclusions. Although the explanations and reasonings for Jesus as God can be complicated, their central points are not as problematic. The most important starting point is to realize one thing: God revealed himself in Jesus. We didn't make up the idea that God can become man, neither did we invent Jesus to start a new religion or something weird like that. God chose to make himself human and to show himself in this way. Since the revelation of Jesus is by God's action, we are now left to wrestle with and understand it.

What if Jesus was a demi-god, half-god and half-man, like Hercules from Greek mythology. Huge problem! How can the infinite, eternal, all-knowing, all-present God be cut in half or half of what he is? How can someone be half-human? Neither of these two situations make sense. You are either completely and entirely God or completely and entirely human. Yet, Jesus is both: completely human and completely God. The only way that we can maintain that Jesus is God and human is to affirm both. These points are evident from Scripture. Jesus ate, slept, felt sad,

walked on the earth, left footprints, got cut. Jesus also performed miracles, called himself God, evidenced everything people expected for a Messiah and God.

Does it make sense that Jesus could be God? The answer is a resounding yes, as attested by Scripture. From the very beginning God made man in his own image. Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Jacob all encountered God in a personal, I mean as a person, way. Even the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah encountered God as having a body and moving about like a human. These characteristics make a clear point that God should have a human-shaped body. God's revelation in a human body is far deeper than that. God desired, for the entirety of human history, to dwell with his people. When they went into exile, he came to visit them. When they were lost and confused in the desert, he gave them signs and symbols so that they would recognize his presence. The reality that Jesus is God, that God came to us in human form, should make sense.

How do we make sense of the God-man Jesus?

The human face of God in Jesus shows forth the great love of God. As Pope Francis wrote in his papal bull announcing the year of mercy called *Misericordia vultus*, God's mercy has a human face. In Jesus, God became personal; he became a person we can touch, hear, see, and relate to. God wanted us to see him, to hear him, to understand him. God loves us so much that he showed himself, gave himself, and continues to give himself for our sake. God becoming human is truly an expression of his love.

One of the major difficulties that the early church encountered, and we still experience it today, is, did God become fully human or just the appearance of human? Some people claimed that Jesus humanity was simply like a coat: God wore a human skin that he later shed. Hence, humanity was not linked with God. This is not the case. Jesus, being fully human and fully divine, assumed everything that goes with humanity into himself and offered it on the Cross. Therefore anything that goes with humanity – hunger, anger, frustration, work, toil, fear – become part of Jesus' offering through his humanity. We have a statement for this: whatever was not brought into the humanity of Jesus cannot be redeemed by him.

My final note for this topic is one of reflection and pondering. Jesus as God and man is rather complicated and confusing to many people. We must ponder this mystery that God became man. Not that a human ascended and became worthy of becoming God, but that God humbled himself to be with us. God so loved us that he wants to meet us, to be with us, even to walk with us.