

The Transfiguration of the Lord

Adults don't often use titles with each other in our culture. We reserve titles for parents, clergy, doctors, politicians and teachers, but we call many other people by their first name both in business and among friends. It feels democratic and fair. In our prayer, we use different titles for God, including "Father". In the gospels the disciples used different titles for Jesus, including "Lord". Only one person in all four gospels called Jesus by his first name: the good thief crucified next to him, who said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

When Jesus referred to himself, he often used the expression "Son of Man." But no one else called him that. The title is mysterious enough, but the English language poses an additional problem because many people regard the word "man" as gender specific, so it sounds as though Jesus called himself the son of a male, ignoring the role of his mother. A more generous translation is "child of humanity," but the expression "Son of Man" is so well used in the vocabulary of Christians that it has persisted in spite of its perceived inaccuracy.

At his transfiguration Jesus called himself "Son of Man" while predicting he would be raised from the dead. He also used the expression in a more ordinary way. For example, at another point of his ministry, he said, "Foxes have holes. Birds of the air have nests. But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In sayings like that one, he probably meant nothing more than, "a guy like me." "Son of Man," then, refers both to the ordinary humanity of Jesus in the present and his exalted divinity in the future. At the transfiguration, he gave his apostles in the present a view of what was to come.

Jesus certainly appropriated this title from a passage in today's first reading. The prophet Daniel, having reported his visions of various strange animals, declares that he then saw something else: "I saw: One like a Son of man coming, on the clouds of heaven; When he reached the Ancient One and was presented before him, The one like a Son of man received dominion, glory, and kingship; all peoples, nations, and languages serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not be taken away, his kingship shall not be destroyed." Christians see in this Old Testament vision a prophecy for the coming of Jesus Christ. We believe he is not just Son of Mary, but also the Son of God, and that he will come again to receive all dominion and glory for ever.

Perhaps Jesus favored the title "Son of Man" to help him balance his humanity and his divinity. It also helps his followers see beyond our humanity to the hope of resurrection. After all, in the present we pass many of our days in ordinary ways. We go to work or school. We spend time with our family. We do chores at home. Sometimes we perform tasks that feel below our dignity - picking up the slack at work from a person who hasn't done the job, caring for the sick and aged when we'd rather be spending our time on other projects, or experiencing unemployment when we know we have better abilities than someone else who has a job. We all know the experience of feeling extraordinary but being ordinary. The transfiguration of Jesus reminds us of something more. Humanity is the path to glory. When we live in a humble present and believe in a glorious future, we share completely in the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

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