

# The Revelation of Jesus's Divinity

Distilled from Chapter 4 of 'Who Is God?' by Richard Bauckham

In the previous talks we have looked at God's revelation of

- **His Presence**, when we examined Jacob's encounter with God, the stairway to heaven and how God is the one who takes the initiative to establish a relationship with us.
- **His Name**, where we studied Moses's encounter with the burning bush, and how God revealed his 'name', 'I am' to Moses as a way of demonstrating to him that while God is beyond human description or control, he wants to make himself accessible to us and to have a relationship with us.
- **His Character**, where, continuing with Moses, we saw how God reveals to him the kind of God he is, perfect and overwhelmingly loving and forgiving, but because of this, hating anything that spoils the relationship that he has with his creation, especially the humans he created to be his representatives.

In this final talk, we're going to look at **Jesus's Divinity**, the mystery that, in Jesus, God is fully human.

We're going to study three key moments in the Gospel of Mark...

- Jesus' Baptism
- The Transfiguration
- The Centurion's confession

## Jesus's Baptism

*At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

Mark 1:9-11

At the outset of Jesus' ministry we see God making it clear that Jesus is far more than a prophet, he is... God (yes, I know it is confusing).

Part of the problem is that when Christians talk about 'God' they are usually talking about 'the Trinity' – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – but when the subject matter of a discussion is Jesus or the Holy Spirit, 'God' nearly always means God the Father.

If you don't understand it, take comfort in the fact that the writers of the New Testament were also struggling with it. Nearly all of them were Jews, who only acknowledged one God... so the increasing realisation that this one God was a relational God, existing in three coequal, coeternal, consubstantial persons (Google it later), was something they probably found more difficult to accept than we do!

And nearly 2,000 years later, the great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon said,

'The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity is best let alone by feeble minds. I do not think there are half-a-dozen people alive who ought to meddle with it.'

And take comfort that Spurgeon was including himself in the 'feeble minds' category!

So, as we have been discovering during this series, whenever we try to describe God there is a LOT of mystery. The important thing is that, as we have seen in our other talks, God is taking the initiative to reach us. In this case, God, in the person of Jesus, has become a human, the greatest miracle in history, and the most costly example of God's desire to live in relationship with humans.

Jesus sees the heavens 'torn apart' as the Spirit of God descends 'in the form of a dove'. The language and imagery used is from Isaiah during the 8th Century BC, at a time where it seemed as if God had abandoned Israel, and where the prophet is recalling the way God saved Israel from

Egypt, how he descended on Mount Sinai to talk with Moses. And Isaiah is begging God to intervene again.

*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains would tremble before you!*

Isaiah 64:1

Mark's gospel observes that Isaiah's prayers are answered in Jesus. God has descended from heaven. God is once more present with his people.

The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus 'like a dove'. This is probably the writer trying to describe something that he has no words for. God the Holy Spirit cannot usually be seen by humans, he is described as being 'like the wind', noticeable only by what he does. In my imagination it was probably a shimmering brightness, rather than a literal dove. But that is pure speculation.

And then there is a voice from heaven, making it clear that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he has the blessing of God the Father...

*"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

This is addressed directly to Jesus. And it is one of the reasons why the term 'Son of God' is so important to the gospel writers. Isaiah again gives us context. Talking about the prophesied 'servant of the LORD' he writes:

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.*

Isaiah 42:1

The Gospel of Mark's main focus is Jesus, and **Jesus's** baptism lets us know that his ministry is one empowered by the **Holy Spirit**, and sustained by his **Father's** love. Ooh... **Trinity!**

## The Transfiguration

After Jesus's baptism, the Gospel of Mark tells us about Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, forgiving sins, stilling a storm and walking on water. He miraculously feeds large crowds, and Peter tells him that he believes him to be the long-awaited 'new David', the messianic king of Israel. Jesus accepts the title, but explains that, unlike popular expectations of the messiah, he is going to be rejected by the Jewish authorities, put to death and rise from the dead. Peter is not happy about this. And Jesus is furious that Peter doesn't accept what he is being told.

The verses directly following this read...

*After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.*

*Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)*

*Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"*

*Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.*

Mark 9:2-8

Peter, James and John see Jesus 'transfigured', meaning that his appearance is radically changed... the description is describing something undescribable, that 'shimmering' again... something for which the disciples have no previous experience or words to describe.

Jesus is then joined by Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures in Jewish history. But the voice that speaks from the cloud makes it clear who the most important figure is. It is Jesus, God's son. He is the

one that the disciples need to listen to, even if they don't like what he is telling them. In Luke's account of the transfiguration, it says that Moses and Elijah are talking about Jesus's 'departure' (literally, his 'exodus'), the very thing that Peter is having such a difficult time accepting.

## **The Centurion's Confession**

The third moment of revelation is at the moment of Jesus's death. Jesus has just gone through a day of suffering that no one else in history has ever gone through, before or since, as he experiences not just the brutal death of crucifixion, but the carrying of all the world's rebellion against God, past, present and future, in his own body and soul.

Mark's gospel records his death...

*With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.*

*The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the son of God!"*

Mark 15:37-39

Jesus 'breathed his last', the word used for this is from the same root as 'pneuma', the Greek word for breath or spirit. And as he does so, the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. Here, as with his baptism and transfiguration, we have a 'tearing apart', a 'revealing', followed by a voice.

There were two curtains in the Jerusalem temple. The outer one hid the holy place from the public, only the priests could go behind it. Another curtain hid the innermost sanctuary, the holy of holies. The only person allowed to enter that area was the high priest, and even he was only allowed to enter it once a year, on the day of atonement.

It is almost certainly this curtain that the Gospel of Mark is referring to.

As God tore apart the heavens at Jesus's baptism and transfiguration, here he tears apart the curtain that separates God from the rest of the world, Jews and non-Jews.

Which makes it all the more significant that the declaration, 'Surely this man was the the son of God!' is not made by God, or by a Jew, but by a Roman centurion.

The centurion's declaration is probably made in admiration at the way Jesus has suffered in such a dignified way. Romans in Jesus's day would not have a problem with believing that an exceptional person could be part-divine, but they would not have believed Jesus to be divine in the same way that Jews or Christians understand the word 'divine'.

Mark's Gospel has spent a lot of time explaining that Jesus is the unique Son of his divine Father, and I think the ambiguity of the soldier's declaration is intentional. For Mark the term 'Son of God' means more than 'the Messiah'. People have hailed Jesus as the Messiah, but so far only demons and Jesus' Father have declared him to be the Son of God.

It is significant that at the moment of his death it is a non-Jew who makes this declaration. Jesus's death was part of God's plan to allow all humans access to a relationship with him, and yet the majority of the Jewish race were were too wrapped up in their pre-conceived ideas to accept that he could be the Messiah that the scriptures prophesied and who they was longing for.

Mark wants us to understand that Jesus, fully God and fully human, has carried the burden of humanity's sin and suffering by dying on the cross. He has done this in full cooperation with God the Father, absorbing all human rebellion against God into himself, and defeating it.

And, the trump card of the Christian religion, Jesus proved his defeat of death by rising again. It is easy to become complacent about this incredible fact, but it is the keystone of our faith.

I want to finish this series about ‘Who is God?’ with how the Gospel of Mark ends.

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”*

*But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

*“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*

*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

Mark 16:1-8

And that’s it. Unlike Matthew, Luke and John, there is nothing about anyone seeing the resurrected Jesus, or his ascension into heaven.

The early Christian Church noticed this, and some of them were so unhappy about it that they added a range of more ‘satisfactory’ endings.

If you have a King James version, the most popular one will be there. If you read the New International Version, or another modern translation, you will see that it is included, but there will be a note to explain that none of the earliest manuscripts include it.

So, let’s return to the real ending of Mark’s gospel. Despite the ‘young man’ telling them not to be alarmed, and assuring them that he ‘has risen’ and is going ahead of them to Galilee, they flee in terror!

And, as is so often the case when we read the Bible, this has a deep ring of truth. These women have just gone through the worst few days of their lives. The man who had given meaning to their lives, who they had come to believe to be the promised Messiah, has been rejected by their nation, and they have recently witnessed him being crucified. Post traumatic stress disorder doesn't even begin to describe it. No wonder they are terrified. No wonder they run.

But why does Mark's gospel end so abruptly? What is it trying to tell us? Why no happy ending?

Mark opens his gospel with 'This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ'. Remember that the majority of people in the years after Jesus's death and resurrection would not have read the Gospels, they would have had them read to them, or someone would have passed on passages that they had memorised.

I believe that the Gospel of Mark's intention is that when these last sentences are read, and when the listeners realise that there is no 'conclusion' to this gospel, that they will ask, "So what happens next?"

We are not meant to merely listen to the story, we have to engage with it, enter into and become a part of the story. Jesus has no time for passive observers. He wants us to wrestle with our response to the good news that he gave his life for. He wants us to make decisions about whether we believe it to be true, and to act accordingly.

Mark's gospel is the beginning of the good news that God has fulfilled his promise to deal with evil and sin. God's faithful church has been living that good news for nearly 2000 years. And if we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and saviour, we are part of that community.

So what happens next? Through the love of the Father, the presence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, working with and through his church, that's down to you and me.

Amen? Amen!