

**St Mary Magdalen, Oxford  
Stations, Reflection & Benediction for Lent  
Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

**“Son of Man”**

Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

When that most quintessential of civil servants, Sir Humphrey Appleby, referred to ‘the one to whom your present interlocutor is in the habit of defining by means of the perpendicular pronoun’, he was, of course, employing one of his famous circumlocutions. What he might have said, with far less breath, was ‘I’.

And that, among all the ink that has been spilt by biblical exegetes on this subject, is one of the least interesting suggestions as to what Jesus means when he refers to himself as the ‘Son of Man’. It simply means, ‘I’. It’s just an Aramaic idiom – similar to our use of the phrase ‘yours truly’.

Now, it is true that it is a title which appears only on Jesus’ lips (it is never used by Paul) but it doesn’t explain why the gospel writers chose to translate what is no more than a colloquialism meaning ‘I’ into the tortuous Greek of ‘The Son of the Man’ – rendered

'Son of Man' in our Bibles. Either they've a touch of the Humphrey Appleby's about them or this title is freighted with more meaning than that.

The most obvious Old Testament reference to the Son of Man comes from that apocalyptic vision in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Daniel. In it, various foreign oppressors are represented by monstrous beasts, but then, 'one like the son of man' in the form of a mere mortal man, appears with the clouds of heaven to be presented to the Ancient of Days and clothed in everlasting sovereignty. In what follows, this Son of Man, is interpreted as a corporate identity, it represents 'the people of the holy ones of the Most High', namely the spiritually renewed and restored Israel.

Why might Jesus find in this title an appropriate self-understanding for his mission and ministry?

I think it unfolds in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of St Mark's Gospel. It begins with the feeding of the multitude, after which the crowds wish to confer on him the title of messianic leader – a prospect which forces Jesus to grab his disciples and beat a hasty retreat. Some verses further on, he asks them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah". The response is equally swift: sternly instructing them not to tell anyone about him. Never mind Messiah, he begins to

teach them, it is the Son of Man who must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Peter is having none of it. Jesus must play not this 'Son of Man' role but the 'Messiah' role. But Jesus' rebuke couldn't have been more stinging: "Get behind me, Satan! You think as men think, not as God thinks."

Emphatically, Jesus has chosen the title 'Son of Man' with which to identify his role as the agent of God's kingdom. If this does indeed allude to the Son of Man in Daniel's vision, it seems to be suggesting that, in the weakness of his humanity and through his intimate communion with his Father, he was to be in himself the new Israel for the new age.

'Son of Man', therefore, was both a declaration of his role and an invitation to his followers to share it with him.

'Son of Man' is not a representative term for a collection of individuals, it is a corporate term for a corporate personality in which we all subsist. What is accomplished in his life, in his humanness, is accomplished in and for each one of us.

By adopting this title, Jesus was implying that those who were ready to become incorporated with him

into that role could share in it, just as they could share in his knowledge of God as Abba, Father.

So I am rather grateful that the Son of Man is not developed as a theological concept in the rest of the New Testament. For a start, it makes it a far more authentic reflection of the thought of Jesus himself. Its inherent ambiguity is also good. In some texts, the 'I' nuance may be dominant, in others the corporate figure of the Son of Man. In no case need they be mutually exclusive.

In a moment we will adore the Son of Man on his throne of glory, seated at the right hand of the Ancient One, in the sacrament of the altar. The Eucharistic feast at which this sacrament was consecrated was the ritual by which we were included with Jesus in the sacrificial self-giving of the Son of Man. So what we adore in the exposition has the same ambiguity about it. It is both the objective 'I' – the perpendicular pronoun – the 'yours truly' – of the Son of Man in his humanity but it is also our corporate humanity made very members incorporate in his mystical body. It is the mystery of ourselves that we adore.