

Will the real Jesus Christ ...
Maundy Thursday
April 2, 2010
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Beginning in 1956 and for 25 years, on and off, Americans tuned in on television to a popular game show called "To Tell the Truth." Contestants tried to fool a panel of inquirers into thinking one of them was an actual person of some notoriety. It was often an athlete, a politician, even the person who was inside the Big Bird costume on Sesame Street.

Each episode concluded with the show's host asking "Will the real so and so please stand up." A pretender or two would feign standing up until finally the real person stood to be revealed. Obviously, this was back in the dark ages when some faces were known, before the paparazzi, 600 24-hour cable channels and the internet – back before everyone was famous and easily identified, even if it they are famous only for being famous.

Throughout most of scripture, who is who is pretty clear. God is God, women and men are women and men, well intended for the most part but often stumbling and bumbling their way through life with God. All that changed in Jesus Christ, however. Christ was the God-man, fully human and fully divine.

But the truth of Jesus's dual identity is hard for us to get our heads around. We know what it is to be human literally down deep in our bones. It's all we know and we have no way of knowing what it is to be divine, to have an element of God within us. We may catch glimpses of the divine in this world; we may even have moments when we feel as if we might reach out and touch God; moments when we are certain God is beside us or that God's arms are wrapped tightly around us. But we can't know what it is to be divine. It is a holy mystery.

Christ balanced his two tightly interwoven natures throughout his ministry. But tonight, we are reminded of the one night when Christ's two natures came into agonizing conflict. It lasted only a moment, but that moment revealed both Christ's love of this world and his obedience to his divine calling, even to the cross, where gave you and me access to God's eternal grace.

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There are two scenes represented in the gospel accounts of Christ's last hours that give us a clear view of Christ's two natures ... but in somewhat unexpected ways. In one, we see Christ's humanity briefly flash over his divinity, like a rampant fire jumping over a road before being contained again. In the other, agents of the human realm, soldiers, of all people, show clearly that they understand Christ's divinity.

The first is, for me, one of the most intimate moments we have as hearers of the gospel. It is the night in the garden of Gethsemene. After the last supper, Christ draws away by himself to pray for guidance from God about how to face the hours to come, his arrest, ridicule, torture and death.

The gospel of Mark tells us that in the garden that night, Christ threw himself on the ground. Can you imagine? Christ doesn't kneel slowly. Nor is it even that he collapses in agony. He throws himself on the ground. Fully human – utterly exhausted, physically and emotionally, spiritually spent, yearning for strength and guidance from God.

There, Christ the fully human hesitates. For a moment, reasons with God about whether it is possible for the hour to pass. Christ the fully human uses the intimate word, "abba", the equivalent of an adult child calling his parent "Daddy." Christ the fully human pleads with God, saying "With you, anything is possible, even stopping these things that are about to happen."

Then, in the next breath, Christ finds his resolve and shows the real strength of a servant of God. "Yet," he says to God, "not what I want, but what you want."

The second scene to consider is one in which the forces of the world reveal with clarity who Christ is. It comes in the 18th chapter of the gospel of John, that same night, as Judas is about to betray the messiah. The gospel reads:

"So Judas brought a detachment of soldiers together with police from the chief priests and the Pharisees, and they came there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus replied, "I am he." ... When Jesus said, "I am he," they all stepped back and fell to the ground."

This time it is not Jesus throwing himself to the ground, but the soldiers and the police, upon hearing divine revelation, the name of God, "I am." Jesus stands firm in his fully divine identity. The soldiers and police, as many as 600, acknowledge that Christ is truly

divine by falling to their knees at the sound of his name, even as they have come to arrest him.

The fully human Christ throwing himself down and yearning to live. The fully divine Christ standing to be delivered with soldiers bowing their heads and bodies in praise before doing what they came to do.

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Friends, in this Holy Week, we are called to reflect on the full set of events that changed the course of humanity in those days in Jerusalem. Tonight, we reenact the fellowship and prayerful communion of Christ's last supper with his friends. We hear anew his mandate to love one another. We hear the events of the Passion. And, we pause to dwell on Christ's internal anguish and sorrow over leaving his earthly ministry and friends. And in that moment, we are closer to understanding the fully human Jesus than any other part of the gospel.

But the issue of who Jesus is doesn't hinge on whether Judas follows through in his betrayal, whether Caiaphas condemns Jesus or whether Pilate sentences him or, finally, whether the chief priests and the mob go through with the crucifixion.

The truth of Christ's identity and God's purpose in coming into the world as a man finally comes to rest in the hands of Jesus, alone in the garden of Gethsemane. He holds out his hands as if to hold his two natures, Jesus the man in one hand, Christ the Lord in the other, and like Lady Justice, he weighs them on a scale to determine what justice is for you and for me.

That night in the garden of Gethsemane, Christ determined that justice for humanity – at least the grace-full justice of our creator - is that he should take the fall for us. So when soldiers and police came to arrest him, he stood up, fully divine, and said, "I am." And, along with the soldiers and the police, we fall to our knees to recognize our Lord and savior. Amen.