

I recall some years ago queuing at the checkout of a supermarket in Ballymena. The queue seemed to be going through much slower than usual. As I got closer to the end of the line I could see that the supermarket was operating their experimental policy of the girl on the checkout not only checking items through but also bagging them.

When my turn came I asked her “Whose bright idea was this?” I got a baleful look. Then she looked across at a deputy manager at a desk not far away. She said, rather witheringly, “His! You can tell he never had to sit at one of these checkouts!”

The younger manager had a bright idea – he was going to improve the store’s service to the customer. He did not have the experience at the checkout that would have told him that his bright idea would actually slow down the service to the customer and send the staff round the bend.

On this Sunday after Christmas, we begin our reflection on the meaning of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. We make a number of bold statements about him – we describe him as Son of God. What do we mean when we say that? As we were thinking on Christmas Eve, what does it say about God, what does it say about us?

The first point I want to make is drawn out from the story of the supermarket till. To say that Jesus is the Son of God is to say that in Jesus, God knows what being human is all about. The Christian Gospel has its climax in the final week of his life – but it is not the whole story. Jesus grew up like we did, he knew

what it was like to laugh, to cry, to know love, to know betrayal and blind hatred. So, because of Jesus, I can come to God with my hopes, my fears, knowing that he knows, knowing that he really understands.

The Bible begins with man made in the image of God. We are given a vision of God's purpose for man – a life of fellowship with God, to walk with God. In the story of the Fall it also speaks of a break in that relationship, the reality of sin. Another thread running right through the Old Testament, intertwined with man's disobedience, is that of God abiding purpose of bringing man back into relationship with himself. We see this expressed in the first of our Eucharistic prayers

Blessed are you, Father,
the creator and sustainer of all things;
you made us in your own image,
male and female you created us;
even when we turned away from you,
you never ceased to care for us,
but in your love and mercy you freed us from the slavery of sin,
giving your only begotten Son to become man
and suffer death on the cross to redeem us:
he made there the one complete and all-sufficient sacrifice
for the sins of the whole world:

Jesus, Son of God, comes to fulfil that purpose. Jesus' teaching is important but Jesus is more than just a great teacher, more than just a good man for us to admire. To confess Jesus as Son of God is to confess that in Jesus God broke into history to deal with sin, (in the words of the Baptismal service I quoted on Christmas Eve) to restore in us the image of his glory. There is a redemptive significance to the life and death and resurrection of him whose birth we celebrate at this time.

So what have we been saying? To speak of Jesus as Son of God is to realise that God knows what it is like to be human, he has shared our joys and sorrows, known friendship and betrayal. He has, if you like, sat at the checkout. In the words of the song “He knows me better than I know myself.”

To confess that Jesus is the Son of God is to realise that God broke into history to deal with sin, (in the words of the Baptismal service I quoted on Christmas Eve) to restore in us the image of his glory. There is a redemptive significance to the life and death and resurrection of this Jesus of Nazareth.

To speak of Jesus as Son of God is to recognise in his life a pattern for mine. He shows us that life lived as God intended is beautiful. God declares to us through Jesus, “This is what I mean by the image of God. See my Son’s holiness, his joy and his goodness, his power and his victory over sin. This has always been my intention for you.” I go back to that ancient prayer of Athanasius that we were thinking of on Christmas Eve: “God became like us so that we might become more like him.”

The life of Jesus is a model for our own response to God. His teaching gives us guidance, his example inspires us and his obedience unto death gives us hope.