

"JESUS AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN"

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be "human?" The word "human" is often used in contrasting ways and because of this we easily come up with different answers to the question. What does it mean to be "human?"

On the one hand, there is a lower sense in which we make use of the word. So often we explain the imperfections in ourselves and in others by making our appeal to this word. From laziness to dishonesty to mistaken judgments to sexual promiscuity people often reach out for that comfortable excuse and say "Well, I'm only human". "To err is human" said Alexander Pope and in so doing echoed the sentiments of most people. Sometimes the word "human" is a synonym for weak, selfish behavior.

On the other hand, there is a higher sense in which we make use of this word and we're hearing it with greater frequency. We often hear about "de-humanization" taking place in our society - the denial of humanity that threatens our culture more and more, and all of us here have daily encounter with those forces that tend to "de-humanize" people - concentrated populations, mass transportation, computer transactions, bigness in offices, schools, and hospitals. There is the corrective concern for that which humanizes, for that which refuses to make people into things and reduce them to numbers. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said something shortly before he died which spoke to me.

"Our concern", he said, "is not how to worship in the catacombs, but how to remain human in the skyscrapers....."

Here, in this second sense, the word "human" implies dignity, integrity, worth, reverence for life, and for the freedom to grow as a person.

DEVELOPMENT

Same word. Different meanings. Let's take it a step further. When you stop to think about it, human behavior is something of a mixed bag, too. It, too, reflects both meanings.

There's that side of human nature that is decidedly unattractive. We talk about the animal that's in man, but in some ways man can sink lower than the animals. Ivan Karamazov made that harsh judgement when he wrote,

"People talk sometimes of bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and knaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it."

Man has devised some artistically cruel ways of killing others. It's man who has developed and dropped bombs, it is man who can lie and cheat and exploit and murder his fellow-man. It was a man by the name of Hitler who not too long ago methodically set out to exterminate the Jews in Germany.

But that's not all there is to it, by any means. If there are ways in which we can sink beneath the animals, so there are ways in which we can rise above, much higher than the animals. For man has reason, conscience, hope, memory, love, faith, freedom. And some days, you see human nature rise to such heights of greatness in ways that make you so darn proud that you want to stand up and cheer for the human race!

And while the papers are full of examples of man's inhumanity to man, full of sordid scheming and sinning, still you have never to look very far around you to find examples of people who are honest in the midst of temptation, noble in the face of suffering, tender in the midst of brutality, patient in the face of impatience. Man can be both less and more than the animals.

TURNING TO THE BIBLE

Turning to the Bible, one finds this dualism in man's nature - both the horns and the halos are there. I recall hearing Dr. Sockman describe a visit of his grandchildren to his home on Thanksgiving Day. It went something like this. "We were so glad to see the little angels come; six hours later we were so glad to see the little devils depart".

The Bible never tries to cover up this fact of human nature - to camouflage this dualism, this "mixture stange of good and ill". Starting way back there with Adam, right down through the pages of time and of history - Abraham, Issac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, Moses, Peter, James, John, Zaccheus, Mary Magdalene, Paul - in every one of them the sins and weaknesses are shown, as well as their magnificent splendor. This is the human situation and the Bible reminds us,

"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...."

And yet - the other side of the coin is that the Bible and more particularly, the interpretation of life according to the Man from Nazareth celebrates the other side of man's nature - the good side, the hopeful possibilities that are there in every one of us.

"So God created man in His own image...male and female, He created them. And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good."

And years later, the Psalmist could rhapsodize about what it means to be human, saying,

"Thou hast made man little less than God, and hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet."

When we are really concerned about converting the "de-humanizing" process into a "humanizing" process, we shall find our greatest support and strength in our friend, Jesus and in His interpretation of life. When we dwell, as Paul put it, "in Christ" and He in us, there are two things that He makes very clear to us. Let me stress them for you.

DISTINCTIVE HUMAN BEING

First-off, He says to each one of us, you are a distinctive human being, with a capacity for wrong-doing and evil, to be sure, but more, with a capacity for goodness and for nobility.

Long ago, to some rag-tag, non-descript people, He said there's nobody else just like you in the entire world, nobody else with the same finger prints, soul prints, talent prints. You may wonder at times how the Creator could possibly have so many patterns for people.

Jesus was always reminding people of what it meant to be a human being in the finest sense of the word, telling them that there lives had meaning, a usefulness, a joy and a strength. So often He came in contact with people who had really given up on themselves as persons - either their circumstances or their sins, or their sorrows or their sicknesses had pretty much ground them under. "De-humanized" is the way we would speak of them today.

But as far as Jesus was concerned, no one was ever so far down or gone that he was beyond recall as a persons. It wasn't that He somehow negated the very human instincts of sex and ambition and anger and fear, all of which can do strange things to persons. He saw them as part of being human, part of the creation that God labeled good. But He restored them to their right place, not as tyrants, but as servants, in developing the whole person instead of destroying a person. As you study the cast of characters in the New Testament you find ample proof of that text from John, "As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become children of God."

To me, this is what the Christian interpretation of life continues to be about - the word that in Jesus Christ people have seen a new revelation of divine love that carries with it some amazing human possibilities.....that while we may be tempted to give up on ourselves as persons, there is One who does not give up, one who has entered this area of human life, who has tasted it to the full and so has earned the right to remind us of our uniqueness, our possibilities, our humanness and so to offer us the grace by which our humanity comes closer to fulfillment.

OTHERS / HUMAN, TOO But there's also something else that this Man from Nazareth is saying to us: not only that we individually are human beings, but also that other people are human beings, too. As we said earlier, this is sometimes hard to remember in the time and place in which most of us live.

For instance, how do you respond to individuality in a giant corporation, or an over-crowded classroom or at five o'clock on the uptown Lexington Avenue Express? It is not easy to remain human in the skyscrapers.

Other people are human beings, too. ~~It's so difficult to remember this at times.~~ We don't always remember it and then it is that this "de-humanizing" process creeps into life - into smaller groups, even into our homes, as we tend to think of people as things and try to manipulate them for our purposes, thinking of them as less and less human.

And then it is that the Man from Nazareth meets us. He confronts us in the depths of our consciences, and haunts us in our dreams with His interpretation of life, saying, "Remember that every one about you is also a person - with his hopes, his dreams, his fears, his possibilities, his hurts. And if you, yourself, know what it is to be a person, mind then that you treat the other man as a person, with full respect for his stature as a child of God". This is the Gospel, according to Jesus.

CLOSING Some years ago a rather strange obituary appeared in the papers. It announced the death of a traveling peddler of Times Square. His name was Morris Donotowsky, and for more than thirty years, he had been known as the "Walking Department Store"...making his way in and out of the shops and luncheonettes with an assortment of toothpaste, razor blades, candy, socks and

the like. He wore a dark cap and a vest that came to be identified with him. But the memorable thing about this man was his interest in people, for as he moved about he passed out royal titles to those he met. For instance, there was King Jack. There was Queen Sadie, There was Prince George, Count Mike, Lady Elizabeth. And, said this obituary, "If there was no title, his greeting was a simple, 'Hello, Human Being'"

Morris, the peddler, in a way reminds one of Jesus, the Prophet. He, too, walked some city streets, giving out royal titles to the most ordinary and common folks he met along the way, making beggars and lepers and prostitutes, traitors and thieves, and even the rich and powerful feel like Kings and Queens. I think this is part of what it means to be a practicing Christian. And what if today and tomorrow we were to remember this in meeting and greeting the people whose lives brush up and touch our own. Instead of putting on those labels that we so often pin on others, we might see them as human - human beings, like ourselves.

At any rate, this is what I understand Jesus in some glorious sense says to each of us and so encourages us to say to others, "Hello, Human being". You're beautiful. You're important. You're a child of God.

PRAYER We thank you, Father, for the meaning that you have given to the word "human" by the life and the love of Jesus, your son. Speak to some of us here this hour who need to have our "humanness" refreshed and renewed. And then make each of us the instrument of Christ's reconciling, humanizing spirit. In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen

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INTRODUCTION What does it mean to be "human"? When you pause to consider the contrasting ways in which the word is used, you can very easily come up with different conclusions. ~~What does it mean to be "human"?~~

To begin with, there is a lower sense in which we use this word "human". We explain a great deal of the imperfections in ourselves and our fellow-man by appealing to that word. From laziness to dishonesty to sexual promiscuity to mistaken judgments to unrealized goals, people often reach for the comfortable excuse, saying, "Well, I'm only human!" "To err is human" declared Alexander Pope, ~~and he was echoed by Robbie Burns when he pleaded pardon for the human race by sighing, "To step aside is human".~~ There are those times when the word "human" seems to be a synonym for weak, sinful and selfish behavior.

But then there is a much higher sense in which we use the word "human" and we are hearing it with greater frequency in our time. For one thing we hear about the "de-humanization" - the denial of humanity that threatens our culture, and we have daily encounter with those forces that tend to de-humanize people - concentrated population, mass transportation, computer transactions, bigness in offices, schools, hospitals, stores. And rightly so, then, there is the corrective concern for that which humanizes, for that which refuses to make people into things and numbers. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said something recently that I pass on to you:

"Our concern is not how to worship in the catacombs,
but how to remain human in the skyscrapers"

"How to remain human in the skyscrapers" - and here the word "human" implies dignity, integrity, worth and the freedom to grow as a person. ~~"Reverence for life"~~

DEVELOPMENT Same word. Different meanings. Take it a step further. When you stop to think about it, human behavior is something of a mixed bag, too, and we find it reflects both of these meanings.

There's that side of human nature that is decidedly unattractive. We talk about the animal in man, but in some ways man can sink lower than the animals. Ivan Karamazov made that harsh judgment when he wrote:

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Remember, it was a man by the name of Hitler who methodically set out to exterminate Jews in Germany, and that it is a man by the name of Manson who is being tried for despicable crimes against his fellow man. It is man who has developed and dropped bombs, who has devised artistically cruel ways of killing others, man who can lie and cheat and exploit his fellow-man.

But that's not all there is to it - by any means. If there are ways in which we can sink beneath the animals, there are other ways in which we rise much higher than the animals. For man has reason and conscience and certain freedom and hope and memory and love and faith. And some days, in some people, you see human nature rise to heights of unbelievable greatness in ways that make you so proud that you want to stand up and cheer for the human race.