

If God Became a Man...

Back in 1995, Joan Osborne released a hit song called *One of Us*. Some of the lyrics went as follows:

*What if God was one of us
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home
He's trying to make his way home
Back up to heaven all alone
Nobody calling on the phone
Except for the pope maybe in Rome*

The writers of the song were either trying to be deliberately provocative, or else they were totally ignorant of what Christians believe the Christmas message is all about: that in fact, God did become one of us. At Christmas time, when we ignore all the commercial clutter and seasonal sentimentalism, Christians make the remarkable claim that God did become one of us, 2000 years ago.

That's an extraordinary claim. In fact, it's usually a laughable claim. History has enough examples of oddballs and eccentrics who believed they were God.

In the 1950s, a Dutch fisherman by the name of Lou de Palingboer told people that he was the resurrected Jesus Christ, between selling European eels. In 1979, an African-American by the name of Hulon Mitchell began a black supremacist group, and changed his name to Yahweh ben Yahweh (God, son of God), and emphasised total devotion to himself. In 1991 he was convicted of conspiring to murder white people as an initiation into his cult. Jim Jones, the founder of a cult which led to a mass suicide, claimed to be the reincarnation of Buddha, Jesus, and several other figures. In our own country, Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the Zulu Nazareth Baptist Church, was claimed to be a manifestation of God.

It's all very confusing. Everyone makes a claim, but who can back it up? Some listening today are Christians, and believe that Jesus Christ alone was the one true Incarnation of God. Some listening today are not Christians and would not accept that. To try to resolve it, what if we took a few steps back, and asked the question this way: If God did become a man, what would we expect? Let's remove from our mind claims made by various emperors, rulers or religious figures. Let us try to imagine, if the Creator became one of us, what would we expect? We then can ask, was Jesus Christ anything like that, when He came? I want to suggest several things we would expect if God became a man, three of which we'll cover this morning.

I. We would expect Him to enter the world unusually

If the Creator of the universe appears among us as one of us, one thing we should expect is that He would not arrive in exactly the same fashion as His creatures. Something, or perhaps several things, would alert us to the Creator's arrival. If He entered the world precisely as all others, with no differences, how would anyone distinguish Him from mere mortals?

So, if you were to invent the way in which God enters the world, perhaps you would have Him come in a brilliant display of light, terrifying sound, accompanied by a train of frighteningly awesome beings. Perhaps you would have Him descend slowly to wondering eyes. But no one

would imagine God among us as a man arriving just as other men do.

In fact, all the people who have claimed to have been God, have done just that. The great religious figures such as Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius all entered the world through completely normal means, a human father, a human mother and a natural birth.

What does the Bible say about how Jesus entered the world?

Luke 1:26-35 ²⁶ Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord *is* with you; blessed *are* you among women!" ²⁹ But when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. ³⁰ Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. ³² "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" ³⁵ And the angel answered and said to her, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.*"

Matthew 1:18-25 ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. ²⁰ But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹ "And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins." ²² So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³ "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." ²⁴ Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵ and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

It is likely that Mary would have been around 14 years old, and Joseph, around 18. They were in a betrothed state, which meant that they were as good as married, except that they had not come together to consummate the marriage and begin life under one roof. Betrothal often lasted as long as a year.

Mary was told first. She was told that the Holy Spirit would be responsible for a miracle in her womb, so that she would give birth, not through the normal means of conception with a human husband.

Mary, upon hearing this, went to her cousin Elisabeth, and stayed with her for three months. Upon returning, it was no doubt obvious that she was pregnant, and Joseph suspected that she had been unfaithful. He was about to divorce her quietly, when he received his visit from an angel to tell him the truth of these events.

According to the Bible, Jesus entered the world in a miraculous way. He was supernaturally conceived. This was the view of all the Gospel writers. Mark, who doesn't record the birth of Christ, speaks of Jesus as the *son of Mary* – an unusual title. Paul spoke of Jesus as born of a woman. And the earliest Christian creeds unanimously say Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary.

This truth is necessary if God is going to become man. You cannot say that God has become man if there is a child conceived by a human father and a human mother and then God comes to indwell that person. Many people have claimed that, but it falls short of God truly becoming one of us. God is just entering one of us, possessing one of us, but He hasn't *become* one of us. And you cannot say

that God has become a man if out of nowhere He suddenly appears among us as a human. That might be apparition of God, it might be a manifestation of God in a recognisable form, but that still doesn't qualify as God becoming one of us. To be one of us, He must enter the world as one of us.

And so only a virgin birth could accomplish this: truly God, as being conceived by the miracle of the Holy Spirit, and truly man by being actually born to a woman.

This was not something which Christians much later made up and added to the story. Now if, in fact, Jesus was simply the natural, physical son of Joseph, we would expect the early enemies of Christianity to have said that. But curiously, we find instead that some of the Jewish writings of the early centuries refer to a miraculous healer called Yeshua ben Pandera. Yeshua, or Jesus, the son of Pandera. According to some sources, the Jewish legend was that Mary was an adulteress, and the father of Jesus was a Roman centurion named Pandera. Now as Columbo TV detective used to say, "I just got one more question" - if the birth of Jesus was a normal birth, why did the Jewish enemies of His followers have stories of an adulteress relationship with a Roman soldier? Obviously they were responding to something, something which the Christians believed, very early.

Would a virgin birth qualify as an unusual entrance into the world? As if that weren't enough, there was an astronomical event of such significance that some Eastern astrologers got on their camels for an arduous journey to come and welcome what they interpreted to be a king. A host of angels was seen by shepherds, praising God and telling them that a Saviour had been born, Messiah the Lord.

Can this be said of other candidates for God in human flesh? Sun Yung moon? Augustus Caesar? Shembe?

If God became a man, we would expect Him to enter the world unusually.

II. We would expect Him to display authority over creation

If the Creator of the universe appears among us as one of us, we would still expect Him to have unusual authority over everything He has made. If an author writes Himself into His own story, he still has the power to change the story as he likes. If a computer programmer were to include himself in a game he designed, he would still have the power to control the game in ways the other characters could not. The One who made matter, made time, made space, made the laws of physics, if He appeared among us, we would expect Him to be subject to all those things, and yet able to transcend them if He wanted to. Though He could get hot or cold, we would expect that He could control the weather if He wanted to. Though He would walk on the ground as one subject to gravity, He could transcend it if He wanted to. Though He would experience time, and even age, He could change the rate at which things mature or die or form, if He wanted to. Though He could experience pain, He could exercise power over any and every form of human disease or deformity.

That's an extremely tall order. Ancient mythology did have stories of people who controlled nature itself. However, in most of those myths, it was a god himself controlling nature. Not only so, but when you read those stories, the miracles are usually useless, ostentatious and absurd.

But who of the people that have claimed to be God have ever shown power over creation? Antiochus Epiphanes, the great persecutor of Israel, called himself Epiphanes to claim that he was God Manifest. But did He display any powers over nature? In 2007, CNN reported that a 61 year-old Puerto Rican man by the name of Jose Miranda had a following of thousands, claiming to be God incarnate. Did He display any power over creation?

By contrast, the Gospel writers record something different about Jesus.

Matthew 11:5 ⁵ "*The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.*"

The Gospel writers record 27 miracles that Jesus did, and these were clearly a selection of many more that He did.

He displayed power over physical disease and deformity, healing leprosy, withered hands, deafness, blindness, dropsy, hemorrhage, fever and even restored a severed ear. He displayed power over nature in calming a storm, walking on water to help disciples in a storm, directing fish into a net, multiplying food, converting water into wine, and drying up a fig tree in accelerated time. On three occasions, He raised the dead.

All the other biblical writers acknowledged His miracles. When we read of the miracles of Jesus, they seem nothing like the pointless demonstrations of Hindu gurus, the flamboyant and show-off magic of legend, myth and folklore, or even the vindictive and spiteful displays in some rabbinic writings. The miracles of Jesus were demonstrations of His person, but always done to help – to feed, heal, restore, release. Jesus miracles display a heart of compassion.

And, once again, we have the witness of Jesus enemies, that is a smoking gun that Jesus did some miraculous things. On several occasions, there is reference to Jesus who practised magic arts. Sanhedrin 43a says, "Jesus practised magic and led Israel astray". Once again, if Jesus didn't do miracles, why would anything like that need to be said?

Many years later, one of the Roman emperors, named Julian the Apostate (361-363), tried to get Rome back to paganism. He unwittingly testified to Christ's miracles when he said, "Jesus...did nothing in his lifetime worthy of fame, unless anyone thinks it a very great work to heal lame and blind people and to exorcise demoniacs in the villages of Bethsaida and Bethany"

If God became a man, we would expect Him to enter the world unusually, and exhibit power over creation. We've only listed two criteria, and so far, the only one keeping up, is Jesus of Nazareth.

If God became a man,

III. We would expect Him to speak the wisest words ever

Imagine for a moment, the mind that created the universe, sitting before you in human form. What would you expect to come out of His mouth when He speaks? Would it be foolish, trivial, boring? Would it be filled with exaggeration, inaccuracies, or wrong information?

No, if the God who made all things is in front of us, we would expect that He would possess unprecedented and unparalleled wisdom. We would expect Him to answer the deepest questions. We would expect Him to solve man's spiritual hunger, and penetrate through the folly of human wisdom. We'd expect Him to speak nothing but the truth, and to do so in a way which would be so striking, so remarkable, that His words would be recorded and repeated.

When we think about possible candidates for deity, and we think of the words they have spoken, what do we find?

Sai Baba, who claimed to be God in flesh taught celibacy after the age of fifty, vegetarianism, offering of fruit to a pyre, and the ritual chanting of his own name. Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification Church in Korea, also claims to be an incarnation of God. He once said that the First World War, the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Cold War served as reparation

payments to God to prepare the world for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Claude Vorilhon, claims that he met an alien in 1973, and became the Messiah after that. He teaches that world peace will come about when people embrace the perverted sexual practices of his group.

It seems to be true that when a person claims to be God, his teachings are usually bizarre, aberrant or even dangerous.

So what does the Bible say about the kinds of words Jesus spoke? Well, not only do we have many of Jesus' words preserved for us, we also have accounts of the effect that His words had on the people that listened.

Matthew 7:28-29 ²⁸ And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, ²⁹ for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

John 6:66-69 ⁶⁶ From that *time* many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. ⁶⁷ Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" ⁶⁸ But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ "Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

John 7:44-49 ⁴⁴ Now some of them wanted to take Him, but no one laid hands on Him. ⁴⁵ Then the officers came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why have you not brought Him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" ⁴⁷ Then the Pharisees answered them, "Are you also deceived? ⁴⁸ "Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? ⁴⁹ "But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."

Bernard Ramm said, "Statistically speaking, the Gospels are the greatest literature ever written. They are read by more people, quoted by more authors, translated into more tongues, represented in more art, set to more music, than any other book or books written by any man in any century in any land. But the words of Christ are not great on the grounds that they have such a statistical edge over anybody else's words. They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. And where is their greatness? Their greatness lies in the pure, lucid spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast; namely, Who is GOD? Does He love Me? What should I do to please Him? How does He look at my sin? How can I be forgiven? Where will I go when I die? How must I treat others? No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect GOD to give, and we who believe in Jesus' deity have no problem as to why these words came from His mouth."

Jesus never wrote a book, but His recorded words have perhaps caused more books to be written about them than anyone else.

Some critics have said that everything which Jesus said, was said by someone else before him or after him. W.S. Peake agreed, and then pointed out "We have no other teacher who so completely eliminated the trivial, the temporal, the false from his system, no one who selected just the eternal and the universal, and combined them in a teaching where all these great truths found their congenial home. These parallels from the teaching of others[,]...how is it that none of these teachers furnishes us with any parallel to the teachings of Christ?...How was it that a carpenter, of no special training, ignorant of the culture and learning of the Greeks, born of a people whose great teachers were narrow, sour, intolerant, pedantic legalists, was the supreme religious Teacher the world has known, whose supremacy here makes Him the most important figure in the world's history?"

So what is the verdict? We have proposed three tests we would expect if God became a man – enter the world unusually, display control over creation, speak the greatest words ever. And only Jesus, fulfills those three. He is truly the Son of God, who became man for us.

So what? What then?

Paul tells us in 1 Timothy

1 Timothy 2:5-6 ⁵ For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time,

God became a man, so that there could be a mediator between God and man. Why do we need a mediator? Because we are not at peace with God. We don't live according to our own consciences. We don't live in light of what we see in creation. What we condemn in others, we ourselves do. We're estranged from him.

The next verse tells us what He did. He gave Himself as a ransom. He gave His perfect life as payment for us. He satisfied God's just demands and penalty so that we can be reconciled to God.

Well, once again, the words of C.S. Lewis come back to us:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”