
*Unto God be the glory –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This morning,
I continue my
eccentric series
of sermons
on the early Councils
of the Church.

As I explained
the foundational
dogmas of the church
were defined at 7 so-called
ecumenical councils.

‘Ecumenical’,
because they precede
the split between
- the Roman Catholic
- and Eastern Orthodox
Churches.

Having addressed
the first 3 councils...,
this morning,
it's the turn of the 4th –
perhaps the most
controversial of all.

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Controversial to this day.

Particularly in the past
250 years,
various theologians
have argued for its
drastic revision,
if not outright rejection.

Before I explain why...,
we need to look at
the council itself.

It was convened
by the emperor
with a view to resolving

the sharp theological differences
that threatened to tear apart
- not only the church
- but the empire.

The first 3 councils
had upheld the full deity
and full humanity
of Jesus.

The problem that remained
was how best to speak
of Jesus such that
- the integrity
of his divine
and human natures
remained uncompromised,
- whilst at the same time
affirming the unity
of his person.

How could he be
- altogether God
- and altogether human,
- and yet, one person?

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Various solutions
had been proposed.

On the one hand:
the so-called 'Nestorian' solution
said Jesus was a man
intimately connected to,
but not identical with
the divine Word.

On the other hand:
the so-called 'Monophysite' solution
said that –
- when the divine Word
...*became flesh*,
- his humanity
was swallowed up
by his divine nature.

In between these two
was the so-called
'Nicene' party,
who saw in each of these
a heretical compromise
of the Nicene Creed.

Three parties
at odds then –
and the emperor
summoning the church
to resolve their differences.

Bishops from –
the middle east,
north Africa,
Turkey, and Greece,
as well as papal representatives
from Rome
travelled to Chalcedon –
a town across the Bosphorus
from Constantinople
(modern Istanbul).

The numbers vary,
but there were likely
upwards of 450 Bishops
in attendance –
making it by far
the largest of
the early councils.

Also present
were 19 imperial commissioners –
representatives of the emperor.

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The 1st session
was convened
on October 8th,
in the year 451.

Much of that first day
was devoted
to matters of business.

Late on...,
the commissioners,
on orders from the emperor,
asked the bishops
to draw up
a doctrinal statement.

Instead,
the council adjourned –
the bishops chanting:

“Holy God,
Holy and Mighty,
Holy and Immortal,
have mercy on us”.

It's the first mention
in history
of the so-called ‘Trisagion’
[‘Thrice Holy’] –
a hymn sung to this day
in our liturgies.

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At the 2nd Session,
2 days later,
the commissioners
again asked for
a doctrinal statement.

Instead...,
the bishops ordered
that the Nicene Creed
be read.

At the end of the reading
they stood and shouted:
“This is the faith
of the Fathers
and the Apostles”.

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The reticence of the bishops
to formulate a dogmatic definition
beyond the Nicene Creed
reflects their conviction
that the mystery of
the incarnation of God –
the Word made flesh –
could not be wrapped up
in a neat package
of sophisticated words
and phrases.

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Not until the 5th session –
2 weeks later –
did the bishops finally agree
to the emperor's demand.

A commission was appointed
to compose a draft,
which was then
presented to the council
for its approval.

Three days later,
the Emperor crossed
the Bosphorus
to attend in person
the ceremonies
promulgating
the Council's so-called
'Definition of Faith'.

Solemnly,
the papal representatives,
and after them
some 452 bishops,
affixed their signatures
to the document.

What did it say?

It began with
a strongly worded
reaffirmation of the Nicene Creed;
only then appending
its statement –
as a supplement.

It's quite brief.

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First..., comes
a ringing affirmation
of the unity of Christ's person:
(quote)
"Following the holy Fathers
we all with one voice
confess our Lord Jesus Christ
one and the same Son..."
(end quote)

Which is to say:
Jesus is none other than
the 2nd Person of the Trinity.

As one recent scholar puts it:

“...in the man, Jesus of Nazareth,
it is the Son of God himself
who appears and lives”.
(P. Smulders, S.J., *The Fathers on Christology*, 136)

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Then comes
an equally robust
affirmation of Jesus’
two natures –
- altogether God,
- and altogether human:
(quote)

“...we all ... confess
[the one Jesus Christ to be]...
- of one substance
with the Father
as touching his Godhead,
- of one substance
with us
as touching his humanity,
to be acknowledged
in two natures...”.
(end quote)

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Jesus is not
an inferior heavenly being.

But, neither is he
an exceptional human being –
a kind of spiritual superman.

He is – at once –
- “true God of true God”
- and truly one of us –
human as we are.

Indeed..., he’s more
authentically human
than you and I.

After all, he made us
in the first place.

Not surprisingly then –
in becoming one of us –
he became “the perfect
and complete human...”.
(P. Smulders, S.J., *The Fathers on Christology*, 137)

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Having affirmed
- the unity of Christ's person
- and the duality of his natures,
the Definition
lists 4 adverbs –
at least, they're adverbs
in the original Greek.

In English
they translate as:
- "...without confusion,
- without change,
- without division,
- without separation".

Each 'adverb' refutes
one or another
of insufficient attempts
to resolve the mystery
of our Lord's being,
at once,
both God and human.

Jesus – did not stop being God
when he became human;
nor was he a human
intimately related to,
but not actually God;
nor was his humanity
eclipsed by his divinity;
nor can his actions
be divided up –
his divine nature
doing divine things,
and his human nature,
human things.

The 4 adverbs
rule out all of these.

But notice –
and this is all-important –
the adverbs function negatively.

They rule out
inadequate explanations,
without pretending
to a more adequate solution.

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Why?

Because...,
- our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –
- and our Lord Jesus Christ –
the Word of God *made flesh* –
are essentially mystery.

They're beyond
our capacity
fully to comprehend.

That's why...,
as we heard –
the bishops begin their statement –
- not, 'we ... explain' –
- but, "we ... confess...".

All heresies so-called,
undertake,
in a variety of ways,
to solve the mystery –
to make sense of it
on our terms.

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But, if the various
conciliar definitions
don't pretend to resolve –
to explain – the mystery,
what do they do?

They provide rules
for talking about
the great mysteries
of our faith.

In regard to this morning's
Council of Chalcedon,
we must speak of Jesus,
in two ways –
simultaneously.

We must "...identify him
as God –
acting in our midst".

At the same time,
we "...must account for him
as a human being –
in the ordinary sense
of the term".

“Both accounts are necessary”.
(Richard Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, 31)

More often than not,
in these early centuries
it was his authentic humanity
that tended to be
short-changed.

Whereas, more recently –
in the past 250 years –
it's the reverse.

Either, Jesus is said
to be a human being
with a heightened
God-consciousness –
consistently in touch
with God,
and eliciting from us
a like relation to God.

Or, he's said
to have epitomised
what authentic human
life and behaviour look like,
so that he is, for us,
an exceptional, inspiring
teacher and example.

From the point of view
of Chalcedon and
the other early councils
these are at best
reductive mis-representations
of the truth.

Why?

Because his divinity –
his being the 2nd Person
of the Trinity,
the Son and Word
of the Father – *made flesh* –
has been altogether
lost sight of.

Losing that –
we lose the Gospel.

Those 5th Century bishops
fought hard to preserve

the paradoxical unity
of divine and human
in the person of Jesus –
not as an end in itself,
but for the sake of our salvation.

Only God
could redeem the world
from sin, death, and the devil.

But equally...,
only a human being –
in every respect ... as we are –
could legitimately represent us,
as high priest and sacrifice,
...for the sins
of the whole world.
(Heb 4.15; 1 Jn 2.2)

“...both sides
of this paradoxical reality
have to be expressed”.
(J. Zachhuber, *Luther's Christological Legacy:
Christocentrism and the Chalcedonian Tradition*, 130)

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All of which is to say –
and with this I conclude –
neither a spiritual guru,
nor a moral example,
but the radiant mysteries –
- of the triune God,
- and of the only-begotten
of the Father
born of the virgin,
has the power –
- to elicit our adoration and worship,
- and to deliver us from
self-centred self-reliance
into *...the glorious liberty*
of the children of God.
(Rm 8.21)

The last word goes to St Paul.

O the depth of the riches
and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments
and how inscrutable his ways!

....

*For from him
and through him
and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever. Amen.*
(Rm 11.33, 36)