

3. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father. God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father, through him all things were made.

‘When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons,’ writes St. Paul to the Galatians. This is indeed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for we believe that God has not just visited his people according to His ancient promise to Abraham, no He has gone further and sent his own beloved Son. So it is (we believe) that Jesus of Nazareth, born a Jew, of a daughter of Israel at Bethlehem in the time of King Herod and the Emperor Augustus, a carpenter by trade, who was crucified and died in Jerusalem whilst Pontius Pilate was governor and Tiberius was the Emperor, is none other than the eternal Son of God made man. Yes, he came from Heaven, born of the flesh – as John tells us in the opening chapter of his gospel; ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only son of the Father.’

At the heart of our Christian believing is a person, Jesus, the man from Nazareth who is also the only son of the Father. In God’s saving plan for us, we believe God sent his only Son, Jesus, to bring about universal salvation. In the creed we express this by calling Jesus, Lord, coming from the Greek word for God, *Kyrios*, in Hebrew ‘*Yahweh*’, God’s name revealed to Moses. By attributing the title ‘Lord’ to Jesus in the New Testament the Church, from her first confessions of faith, affirmed that the power, honour and glory due to God the Father are due also to Jesus, because ‘he was in the form of God’ and possesses a sovereignty and power shown not only in his rising from the dead, but in his exultation into glory. By us affirming our belief in him as Lord we make him the subject of our present devotion, He is Lord of the church, and the living Lord to whom we give our faith, our love and our loyalty, knowing that his people we may gain the benefits of his passion, the redeeming work God has accomplished in him for our salvation.

We also call Jesus ‘*Christ*’, again coming from a Greek word, denoting the Hebrew word, *Messiah*, meaning ‘Anointed’. For the Church, it became the name proper to Jesus because he accomplished the divine mission, that the word ‘*Christ*’ signifies. To the shepherds, the angel announced the birth of Jesus as the Messiah promised to Israel...

‘To you is born this day, in the city of David, a saviour who is Christ the Lord.’

His eternal messiahship was revealed in his earthly life at the moment of his baptism by John, ‘This is my beloved son’, there is too Peter’s profession of faith, ‘You are the Christ, the son of the living God’, he accepts the title and tells the disciples to keep it to themselves (*Matt 16: 16*). The title tells us Jesus is the one through whom God’s promise and purpose for us reaches its victorious fulfillment. The kingdom of God has broken through into human history and we have already entered into a new world, the world to come, whose full glory is yet to be revealed when Christ comes again.

We also say Jesus is ‘the only begotten Son of God.’ In the Gospels there are the two solemn moments, the Baptism and the Transfiguration, when the voice of the Father himself, is heard calling Jesus, his ‘beloved son’ and in St. John’s Gospel Jesus calls himself ‘the only Son of God’ – a truth affirmed by the Church in the centurion’s exclamation at the foot of cross ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’. A divine son-ship that becomes even more apparent after the resurrection in Jesus’ glorified humanity. Paul, in his letter to the Romans calls Jesus ‘Son of God’ because of his resurrection from the dead – and so it is that the Apostles confess; ‘We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. ‘It is because he is “the only son of God” that mankind can truly be delivered from sin and death. For salvation could in the end only be wrought by God himself, for man could not save himself!’ And so, says Prof. Quick, ‘to give any being who is not God, the place Christians give to Jesus, is to be deceived by the vainest of all human philosophies which makes man the measure of all things and the spiritual centre of the universe’. Indeed it would be idolatrous!

Having affirmed Jesus' titles, the Creed then makes certain assertions about him to further explain who we believe he is in both the historical context and in terms of what we call revelation. The New Testament claims that the climax of God's saving work was the coming of Jesus Christ. As I said at the beginning, Paul writes that 'When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son.' (*Gal 4.4*). This is for Christians the classic or primordial revelation on which the community of faith is founded and which determines our way of understanding God. When we talked previously about God's work of creation, we said that it involved an element of risk – a risk that basically involved sin and evil; a risk that actually threatens creation with distortion even destruction, as St. Athanasius remarked when writing about Jesus and the Incarnation, 'the race of man was being destroyed ... and the handiwork of God was in the process of dissolution': what, he asks, 'was God to do?' 'Suffer corruption to prevail against them and death to hold them fast? And where would be the benefit of their having been made in the first place?' *De Incarnatione VI.7* 'Better for us not to be made than to be left to neglect and ruin.'

To set our Christian believing about Jesus into context we need to remind ourselves that at the beginning. At Creation, God didn't just set it all into motion and let things take their own course, rather he goes on being actively involved, and rather than allowing things to fall into rack and ruin he goes on reconciling the creation to himself and bringing it to its perfection and consummation – meaning says Professor Macquarrie that 'the disorders of existence are healed, its imbalances redressed, its alienations bridged over,' and all of this is going on at the same time- again what we refer to as divine providence!

The early Christian writers, people like Athanasius and Irenaeus, ascribed this on-going work and activity to the *LOGOS*, the second person of the Trinity – the one we describe in the creed as 'God from God, light from light – the one who was too the divine word at the very dawning of creation; him, through whom 'all things were made.' The divine *logos* who at a given time in history became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. This Jesus didn't just appear, the *logos* was always there -the works of providence in the Old Testament are ascribed to the *logos*, the divine word – we can not set a time when his activity in the creation began, rather the divine word, Jesus Christ, was at work even before the beginning – 'of one being with the Father' we say in the creed, 'before all ages.'

The Christian Gospel points to a new and decisive revelation of the mystery of divinity – to bring humanity to new Faith. Time and time again in the scriptures we see God trying to bring Israel back to him, and time and again they slip back into their old ways, but still there was the hope that one day God would act in a decisive way that would change everything.

The New Testament claims that act was the coming of Jesus Christ, breaking into human time, in the 'fullness of time', that moment when God's reconciling work was opened up to the whole of creation, not just Israel. Because we believe this, it is so important that when we try to describe what we believe about this Jesus we get it right. Jesus didn't just fall from the sky, neither did he suddenly appear on the scene in a stable at Bethlehem, rather the divine *logos* as St. John tells us 'became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son of the Father.' A statement that takes us right to the heart of the Blessed yet mysterious Trinity. Jesus was always there but it took the Church over four centuries to put into words how the Church thought we should express that belief. The Nicene Creed was set down at a particular point in that process!

So who is Jesus really? We believe he became incarnate, but does that mean he is somehow only part God and part a man, some kind of mixture? How is it the Church believes that he truly became man while remaining truly God? The first centuries before Nicaea and beyond were rife with heresies, first there was more argument over the nature of his humanity, at one extreme that meant some thought Jesus wasn't a real man at all, it was just God pretending or alternatively God had just adopted a man for his purpose, it was because of this that the Council of Nicea declared that the 'Son of God is begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father' – in other words He shares the divine nature. Arius, a leading heretic, described him as 'a creature but not like any other' and that he was from a different substance! 'But how' asked Athanasius 'could we offer worship to Jesus if he was only of the created order, and how could salvation be possible through him? Fascinating stuff and it gets much more complicated. Indeed this point wasn't settled until the Council of Constantinople in 381AD, and it wasn't until the Council of Chalcedon in 451AD that the Fathers settled the matter for all time declaring;

‘We unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity – like us in all things but sin. He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to His divinity and in these last days for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.’

There is always going to be a tension between ideas of Jesus’ divinity and humanity. We need to be able to think of his life as one which by what it victoriously accomplished has made all the difference to the relationship between man and God, whilst believing that it has made no difference to the eternal truth of who the Son really is as second person of the Trinity!

If we do recognise him as God, we must assert our belief in his humanity, for we believe that ‘the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us’, to save us. God’s plan would not have worked otherwise. If Jesus is true God and true man then doctrinally we must allow a space where the two somehow come together, paradoxical as that may seem – God and Man – the second person of the Trinity, yet ‘first born of creation’ and a man like us in all things, except for sin!

Looking back at the great Christological controversies of the early church, the traditional language used to describe who Jesus is may seem somewhat defective to us in the 21st Century but as Prof. Maquarrie, points out, ‘what we are looking at is a metaphysical analysis of the person of Christ, through the eyes of the early Church,’ rather than us finding out more about any more about the historical Jesus of the gospels.’

When we say this part of the Creed we are merely stating the parameters of what was a theological debate way back in the past between two different theological schools of thought, one centred on Antioch, the other Alexandria. For believers today, what we must always bear in mind is (*Pannenberg*) that there is only one subject of whatever attributes we may care to bestow upon God’s Son. The fundamental presupposition of any doctrinal or creedal formula of the true Godhood and true manhood of Jesus, is that we are describing. One and the same person – the man Jesus of Nazareth, but from different view points.

Does it really matter? Well yes it does. It is unavoidable to try and make some distinction between the two – Jesus’ humanity and his divinity, if we are really want to understand who Jesus is. That there is no escaping this, justifies all the efforts down the ages to assert the unity between the two, that the Jesus of Faith, the Jesus we believe in, is true God and true man!