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

Last month,
on my last visit with you,
I began a summer
series of sermons
on significant persons
and events
in early Church history.

Some of you
may recall
an earlier version
of this
from some years ago.

Feel free to take a nap!

This morning,
I'm focusing
on the first two,
of what would
eventually be seven
so-called 'Ecumenical Councils'
of the Church.

Why was the 1st Council
convened?

To respond to
the provocative ministry
of one, Arius the Libyan –
a brilliant and charismatic priest,
of the diocese of Alexandria
in Egypt.

Arius was troubled
and perplexed
by the orthodox arguments
in favour of Jesus being –
at once –
human and divine.

At the root
of his difficulty
was his radically dualist
view of reality –

inherited from certain
Greek philosophical traditions.

Spiritual reality
was the home
of truth, beauty,
and goodness.

Material reality
might participate in these,
but was essentially corrupt,
and more often than not –
opposed to them.

Humanity's hope lay
in the eventual release
of their immortal soul
from its imprisonment
in all things material,
including the body.

This sharp division
between spirit and matter
meant, for Arius,
that God, who is pure spirit,
neither could nor would
permit himself
to be contaminated
by direct contact
with creaturely reality.

Jesus could not then
be God by nature
("of one substance
with the Father"),
but must be
only a creature.

Though that 'only'
is misleading.

Arius acknowledged Jesus
to be a uniquely exalted
human being –
deservedly earning the title,
'son of God',
by virtue of his unrivalled
holiness of life.

The most exalted
of creatures, then,
but still – a creature –

‘god-like’ –
but not essentially divine.

Condemned by his bishop –
Arius nonetheless
found much support
among ordinary Christians.

So much so,
that popular lyrics
expressing his position
reached ‘the top of the charts’
in 4th Century Egypt
and beyond.

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The result was
a divided Church,
not only in Alexandria,
but across the Mediterranean world.

So sharply divided,
that the Roman emperor,
Constantine –
for the sake of
the unity and peace
of his empire –
convened a Council
in the year, 325,
to settle the matter
one way or the other.

He summoned
318 bishops to Nicaea –
a city on the NW coast
of Asia Minor,
modern-day Turkey.

They came,
with their support staffs,
- from across Europe
as far as Britain,
- from North Africa,
- and from the Middle East.

The champion
of the orthodox –
Athanasius,
was a young deacon,
still in his 20’s –

like his older contemporary,
Arius,
from Alexandria.

Lacking Arius' charm
and charisma,
he was more than his equal
in theological acumen.

Not Greek philosophy,
but St John's Gospel
defined his christology:
*In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God....
The Word became flesh...
and we beheld his glory,
the glory as of the
only-begotten of the Father,
full of grace and truth.*
(Jn 1.1, 14)

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Athanasius
accompanied his bishop
to the Council
as his secretary and
theological advisor.

The Council lasted
for 9½ weeks,
eventually upholding
the traditional teaching
of the Church,
and condemning Arianism
as heretical.

The decision
took the form of a Creed –
word for word
the 1st 2 paragraphs
and the first clause
of the 3rd paragraph
of the Nicene Creed
(that we recite at every
Communion service).

The anti-Arian affirmation
of the deity of Christ
finds emphatic expression
in the opening clauses
of the 2nd paragraph:

“We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ
the only-begotten Son of God,...
God, of God,
Light, of light,
true God, of true God,...
being of one substance
with the Father,
through whom
all things were made”.

Jesus’ uncompromised humanity
is asserted with equal force
in the rest of the paragraph.

Alas, contrary
to the emperor’s hopes,
this by no means
marked the end
of the controversy!

Arianism reemerged
with doubled enthusiasm
just three years later,
aided not least by
sympathetic Emperors.

*

Refusing to compromise... –
in his own words,
“What has the Emperor
to do with the Church?” –
(Athanasius, *Historia Arianos*. 52.3)
Athanasius,
now bishop of Alexandria,
was 5 times banished
from his see –
for a total of 17 years
over the next three decades.

When he died
in the year 373,
the issue remained unresolved.

But eight years later,
in 381 –
nearly 60 years after Nicaea –
yet another Emperor
convened a 2nd
Ecumenical Council –

this time at Constantinople.

The Creed of Nicaea
was affirmed –
with an expanded third paragraph.

The Nicene single sentence –
“We believe in the Holy Spirit” –
was filled out in reaction
to the recent emergence
within the Church
of the so-called
Pneumatomachi
or ‘Spirit-haters’.

Theirs...,
was Arianism in a new key –
denying the deity –
not of the Son –
but of the Holy Spirit.

Happily, as at Nicaea,
the wisdom of that
same Spirit prevailed:
“We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified...”,
and so on.

What shall we say to all of this?

In the first place,
arianism is back in fashion,
has been indeed,
for the past two centuries.

The late 18th Century
enlightenment philosopher
Immanuel Kant,
wrote an influential book
which he called –
Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone.
(I. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [Harper, 1960]).

Retelling
the Gospel-story of Jesus,
he stripped it of all
that makes him out
to be more than
an exemplary human being.

And isn't that
how many in our pews
think of Jesus?

Impatient of creeds
and dogmas,
we prefer to think of him
as an inspirational example
of the best that we can be.

Perhaps that's where
you find yourself.

If we're honest,
how seriously do we
attend to those phrases
that make up
the 1st half of
the 2nd paragraph
of our Creed?

Needless to say,
I've immersed you
in the formulation
of the Creed
because I for one
am not content
to live with
a reduced Jesus.

The Jesus of Holy Scripture
is mystery –
always more than
our best attempts
at explanation.

St Paul says it well,
and I quote:
*I want your hearts
to be encouraged
and united in love,
so that you may have ...
the knowledge
of God's mystery,
that is, Christ himself....*
(Col 2.2f.)

In line with St Paul,
I give my last word
to my go-to theologian,
the 20th Century Karl Barth –
for whom, with St Paul,

the heart of the Gospel
is mystery.

“[T]he concern [of the Councils]”,
he writes,
[was] never to set
the mystery aside,
as though [by their] formulae
[they could] solve the matter
rationalistically.

“[T]he early Church’s endeavour
was ... to lead
the eyes of Christians
in the proper way
to this mystery.

“All other attempts
sought to resolve the mystery
into a human comprehensibility.

“They ... do not regard
the mystery.

“[T]he early Orthodox
were concerned
to gather us
about this centre;
...nothing must be
watered down here;
this salt must not
lose its savour.

“Hence the great
expenditure of effort
by the early Councils
and theologians.

“God the holy trinity,
and the genuine unity
of true God
and true human
in the one Jesus Christ
[are] ... fundamental.

“And we are challenged
to hold on to it” (end quote).
(Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*
[SCM, 1949/66], 98)

*Now unto God
who is able to strengthen [us] ...
according to the revelation
of the mystery
[of] ... the gospel
and the proclamation
of Jesus Christ –
to the only wise God ...
be the glory forever and ever!
Amen.
(Cf., Rm 16.25-27)*