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

Last week
I continued
my summer series
of sermons
on early Church history.

Having treated
the first two
ecumenical councils
at which our Creed
was formulated –
this morning
we jump forward –
just 50 years –
to the 3rd Ecumenical Council
convened at Ephesus.

What was at issue? and
Who were the chief contestants?

The 1st two Councils,
defined the dual natures
of Christ –
at once:- altogether God
and altogether human.

Fair enough
as far as it goes.

But what of those two words –
‘at once’?

Humanity and divinity
are so different:
“how could Jesus be both
at the same time?”
(William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology:
An Introduction*, [Westminster, 1983], 80)

One of the chief theologians
at the earlier council
of Constantinople –
Gregory of Nyssa –
admitted he didn’t know!

In his own words:
“...God was born
in the nature of man.

But how? – this... –
being a subject
unapproachable by
process of human reason –
we decline to investigate”.
(Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 11, in
From Glory to Glory... [Scribner's Sons, 1961], 486)

That sufficed –
until it didn't!

Until, as one writer puts it,
“...some theologians
developed ideas
that forced their
fellow Christians
to defend their faith
more precisely
in order to show
why those ideas
were wrong”.
(Placher, *A History...*, 80)

What happened?

For more than a century,
Christians had been praying
to Mary *theotokos* –
‘mother of God’.

All well and good.

Until Nestorius,
the newly consecrated
patriarch of Constantinople,
proclaimed in a sermon
that it wasn't.

In his own words,
“Let no one
call Mary *theotokos*,
for she was only
a human being,
and it's impossible
that God should be born
of a human being”.
(Quoted by Leo D. Davies, S.J., *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*
(325-787): *Their History and Theology* [Liturgical Press, 1990], 140)

Calling Mary
‘mother of God’,
he said,
amounts to saying –

God was two years old –
two years after
Jesus' birth.

He proposed,
as an acceptable substitute,
that Mary be called
christotokos,
'mother of Christ'.

Alas...,
"[w]hen theologians interfere
with popular piety,
they [stir up a hornet's nest]..."
(Placher, *A History...*, 82 [Placher's last
phrase is 'arouse opposition'])

Nestorius soon found himself
under bitter attack
as a defamer of
the Virgin Mary.

His sermons
were interrupted
with cries of –
'Mary is the mother of God'.

A placard was posted
in the cathedral
accusing him of denying
Jesus is God.

News of the controversy spread... –
eventually reaching
the ears of Cyril,
patriarch of Alexandria.

If Nestorius was eloquent
but austere –
Cyril – a man of great learning
and personal humility –
could be hard and intolerant.

The 'hammer of heretics'
as he described himself.

In a famous letter –
addressed to Nestorius –
Cyril denounced
his rejection of *theotokos*.

Nestorius responded in kind –
denouncing Cyril,
and defending
his own position.

The notoriety and bitterness
of the feud
eventually led the emperors –
- Valentinian in Rome,
- and Theodosius
in Constantinople –
to convene a Council
to decide the issue
one way or the other.

More than 200 Bishops
with their advisors
gathered at Ephesus,
in Asia Minor
(modern Turkey)
in 431.

I'll not go into
the details of the Council,
which was something
of a comedy
(or should I say, tragicomedy)
of errors.

Suffice to say,
blessed Mary, *theotokos*,
'mother of God'
was upheld,
and, Nestorius –
condemned and deposed.

Ordinary churchgoers
celebrated the decision
with the cry:
'Christ has defeated heresy;
Mary, mother of God,
has triumphed
over Nestorius'.
(Cf., Davies, *Councils*, 156)

Nestorius perished,
but, to this day,
there remains
a vibrant Nestorian Church.

In recent years,
much has been done
to rescue Nestorius
from unflattering caricatures –
ancient and modern –
partly with a view
to healing the breach
between the Nestorian
and orthodox branches
of the Church.

In the time left to me,
I want to try to clarify
what was really
at issue here.

At its root
is something
we saw last week
in Arius.

It's the determination
to keep God
uncontaminated
by too close contact
with creaturely existence.

It was – especially –
the claim that God,
the Son of God,
was conceived in,
and born of,
a human mother,
that was most
offensive.

No one says it better,
than the 3rd century
neo-platonist philosopher,
Porphyry,
in his treatise, titled –
Against the Christians.

I quote:
“If some [Greeks]
are light-headed enough
to believe that the gods
live inside idols,
their thought remains
much purer than
that [of the Christians]

who believe that [God]
entered the Virgin Mary's womb,
became a foetus,
was engendered,
and wrapped in clothes,
was full of blood,
membranes, gall,
and even viler things”
(end quote).

(Porphyry, *Against the Christians*, fragment 77,
ed. A Harnack, *AbhBerlAk* [1916], 93
[My ‘Greeks’ is his ‘Hellenes’; my ‘God’ is his ‘the divinity’]).

Nestorius,
and Arius before him,
may well have argued
as they did –
in response to such
anti-Christian polemics.

Unlike Arius though,
Nestorius affirmed
the full deity of Jesus.

But, he insisted –
his divine nature
could not have come
into contact with
the womb of the Virgin,
let alone,
suffered and died
on the Cross.

“Mary is the mother
of the human [Jesus]”,
he writes,
“serving as an ‘instrument’...
for the divinity,
[but] not [containing
and giving birth to]
the divinity....

“Mary is
‘mother of the human’,
or more exactly,
‘mother of Christ’,
but not ‘mother of God’”.

(Cf., Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the
Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* [Abingdon, 1970/88], 364)

Critical here
is the suggestion

of a division,
however slight,
between the Son of God
and the human Jesus.

They were 'conjoined'
in the closest relation,
Nestorius insisted,
but not 'essentially united'.

Cyril would have
none of it.

Nestorius' Jesus,
he argued,
was an anomaly,
a mixture,
a *tertium quid* –
'third thing',
neither true God
nor true human.

Whereas...,
the Jesus of Holy Scripture
and the Creed
was God the Son –
not merely 'conjoined with',
but – quoting St John –
...become *flesh*,
...made *flesh*.

Having taken
human nature
into himself,
God must be said
to have been
born of the virgin
and, yes, suffered
and died
upon the cross.

The words and deeds
of Jesus
cannot be split into
discreet categories –
- acting here,
as a man
apart from God,
- and there,
exclusively as God.

The divine Word
...*become flesh* –
knew hunger, thirst,
weariness, pain,
and yes, death.

The human Jesus –
God incarnate –
healed the sick,
raised the dead,
was himself raised bodily
from the dead,
and ascended
to the right hand
of the Father
in heaven.

The one person,
Jesus,
was, and is –
true God
and true human –
unconfused
and undivided.

Accordingly...,
the blessed Virgin Mary
is neither
- *anthropotokos* – ‘mother of man’,
- nor *christotokos* – ‘mother of Christ’,
- but *theotokos* – ‘mother of God’.

Cyril didn’t solve,
nor did he claim to solve,
the mystery of the incarnation –
God, the Son of God
become human.

Rather...,
he described it
so as to rule out
attempts to reduce it –
to render it explicable
within the limits
of human understanding.

His efforts would be
further refined over
the next two centuries.

Finally, and briefly,
a somewhat eccentric
conclusion.

From my earliest childhood,
my father would quote
a sentence from the
16th century Anglican divine,
Richard Hooker.

Great name!

I've always taken
mischievous delight
in the fact that
the Anglican Church
- was born in Henry VIII's
adulterous bed,
- and its most famous theologian
is named Hooker!

Back to my Father's quotation.

He admired it
for its elegant construction,
and, still more,
for the wisdom
of its content.

Here it is:
"Dangerous it were
for the feeble brain of man
to wade far into the doings
of the Most High;
whom although
to know be life,
and joy to make
mention of his name,
yet our soundest knowledge
is to know that we
know him not
as indeed he is,
neither can know him;
and our safest eloquence
concerning him
is our silence,
when we confess
without confession
that his glory is inexplicable,
his greatness above
our capacity and reach".
(end quote)

(R. Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, I.1.2 [I:59.12-19])

For me, that says,
with extraordinary eloquence,
what makes the dogmatic
tradition of the Church
of lasting significance:
setting forth and guarding,
as it does,
the holy and
inexhaustible mystery
- of our God,
- and of his gospel.

After all...,
in the words
of one of my tutors:-
'God is to be worshipped
before he is to be understood':
*For from him
and through him
and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever. Amen.*
(Rm 11.36)