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

This morning
I bring my summer
series of sermons
to a close.

I've devoted myself
to significant moments
in the early history
of the Church.

This morning
it's the turn of
the 6th of the so-called
'ecumenical councils'.

As we saw last Sunday:
at Chalcedon in 451
twin threats –
- to the unity of Christ's person
- and to his authentic humanity
were addressed.

The one person, Jesus,
was and is
truly God
and truly human.

After Chalcedon,
those who'd tried
to absorb, and so eclipse
Jesus' humanity in his deity,
tried again,
but in a different guise.

'Ok, they said,
Jesus was possessed
of both divine nature
and human nature.

'But, his will,
his agency,
his decision-making
was divine.

‘His human nature
was without a will –
or..., possessed of a will
so altogether dominated,
by his divine will –
as to be without effect’.

This heresy,
is called ‘Monothelitism’
from two Greek words:
- *mono* – ‘one’,
- and *thelêma* – ‘will’ or ‘agency’.

In the decades
prior to our Council
Monothelitism gained
the upper hand.

It was the perseverance
of a monk, named Maximus,
that saved the Church –
albeit at enormous
cost to himself.

Born in 580, in Palestine,
Maximus was early “initiated
to the monastic life
and the study
of the Scriptures...”.

“He moved from Jerusalem
to Constantinople,
and from there,
because of the [Moslem] invasions,
sought refuge at [Carthage,
in North] Africa”.

In his late 60’s,
he was summoned to Rome
by Pope Martin I
to assist him
in his resistance
to Monothelitism.

At a council of Western,
Latin bishops in 649
the doctrine of
the two wills of Christ
was affirmed.

Alas, "Pope Martin
was made to pay dearly
for his courage".

Summoned
by the emperor
to Constantinople
he was arrested, tried,
and condemned to death.

His sentence
was commuted
"...into permanent exile
in the Crimea
where he died...
after two years
of humiliation and torment".
(Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers*, 154f.)

Pope Martin had sought
Maximus' assistance
because of his reputation
as an opponent
of Monothelitism,
and his rigorous
and scholarly defence
of the two wills
of Christ.

Maximus refused
to countenance
any reduction of
Christ's humanity.

His refusal
was rooted in his,
and indeed the Church's,
understanding of
salvation in Christ.

Three centuries earlier
St Athanasius had said
(and I quote):
"What has not been
assumed [by Christ]
has not been healed.
It's what is united
to his divinity
that has been saved...".
(end quote)

(Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 7.42)

In line with Athanasius,
Maximus argued
that humanity
without a will –
a woman or a man
without a will –
is not a real person
but an ‘amputated’ one.

Absent a human will,
Jesus would not
have experienced
the drama of being human –
which consists precisely
in conforming our will
with our God’s.

Maximus insisted –
quoting Hebrews 4.15 –
Jesus was in every way ...
as we are,
yet without sin.

His humanity
includes the capacity
humanly to will,
to choose, to deliberate,
and to decide.

But just here,
the problem arises.

Possessed of two wills –
the divine will,
and a human will –
do we not end up
with a dual –
even schizoid –
personality?

It’s in his response
to this challenge
that the genius of Maximus
comes to vivid expression.

I said before
that from an early age
he was a student
of Holy Scripture.

So it is...,
he addresses
this dualistic dilemma
by referring us
to certain key
biblical texts.

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Two in St John's Gospel.

Chapter 5, verse 30:

*I seek to do
not my own will
but the will of him
who sent me.*

And again, chapter 8, verse 28:

*I do nothing on my own,
but as my Father
has taught me
so I speak.*

Demonstrating

what it is
to be truly human –
human as God
made us to be –

Jesus does not find
his fulfilment –
his integrity and wholeness –
in himself,
but by surpassing himself,
going out of himself –
finding his totality
and completeness
beyond himself
in God the Father.

The isolated individual

who finds and defines
him- or herself
over against others
and even God
is not a complete person –
but is less than
fully human.

For Maximus,

this is not a matter
of merely philosophical
or psychological
speculation.

He sees it realised –
vividly demonstrated –
in Jesus' actual life.

Which brings us
to the centre-piece
of his biblical work –
the drama of Gethsemane.

You'll recall...,
after his last supper
with his disciples,
Jesus leads them
to the Mount of Olives
and into the garden
of Gethsemane.

"I am deeply grieved",
he tells them,
"even to death;
stay here,
and keep awake with me."
(Mt 26.38)

Going a little further
into the garden
...he casts himself
on the ground
and prays:
"Father, if you are willing,
remove this cup from me;
yet, not my will
but your will be done."

Returning to his disciples
and finding them asleep,
he leaves them again
and:

In his anguish...
prayed more earnestly,
his sweat become
like great drops of blood
falling down on the ground.
(Mt 26.39; Lk 22.22, 24; cf., Mk 14.34ff)

It's the words
of Jesus' prayer,
but also its immediate context,
that occupy Maximus'
close attention.

The context first.

Those who denigrated
 Jesus' human will
 see him playing with it,
 but then overcoming it,
 cancelling it,
 in favour of his divine will.

Not Maximus.

It's all-important for him
 that these are not
 sterile propositions
 to be argued about.

On the contrary:-
 they are Jesus'
 most intense
 and anguished prayer.

He is,
 from beginning to end,
 in the closest communion
 with his heavenly Father.

He knows –
 more than that –
 he feels in the depth
 of his being,
 what will be
 the horrific cost
 of our salvation.

Up against it,
 he pleads with the Father
 that another way
 might be found.

And yet..., he knows
 the way of the cross
 is the Father's will for him,

He knows...
 in no other way
 can the full cost
 of our liberation
 from sin and death
 be paid.

Indeed, he knows
 this has been
 the goal of his

God-given mission
from the beginning.

So he willingly
yields himself
to the Father's will
and purpose:
*...yet, not my will,
but yours be done.*

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Moreover –
contrary to the Monothelites
who divided Jesus' prayer –
- the 1st part,
his frail human will
pleading for another way,
- the 2nd part,
his divine will
overcoming and correcting it –
Maximus insists
both wills are at work
in both parts
of the prayer.

At no point
in this prayer –
nor indeed in his life
as a whole –
are his divine and human wills
independent of one another,
let alone in conflict.

Rather, are they
in perfect harmony:
*I can do nothing on my own....
I seek to do not my own will
but the will of him who sent me.*
(Jn 5.30)

I said that Maximus'
unstinting defence
of the two wills of Christ
was at enormous cost
to himself.

In his 82nd year,
he was summoned
to Constantinople
and ordered to
renounce his views.

Refusing to cow-tow
to the emperor,
he insisted –
to his face:

“It cannot be said
that Christ has
[only] a single will”.

(cf., *Patrologia Graeca* 91, cols 268-9)

Subjected to an exhausting trial,
he was condemned for heresy
and sentenced to cruel mutilation –
his tongue cut out,
and his right hand
amputated.

Exiled to Colchis
on the Black Sea
he died – worn out
by the suffering
he’d endured –
on the 13th of August, 662.

His suffering
was not in vain.

Less than 20 years
after his death
a new emperor convened
the 6th ecumenical council.

Maximus’ doctrine of
the 2 wills of Christ
was confirmed
as orthodox,
and Monothelitism
condemned as heretical.

It’s, admittedly,
tempting to dismiss
these controversies
as so much quibbling
over details.

But by and large,
the Church avoided
dogmatic definitions
until constrained
by heretical threats
to our salvation in Christ.

Invariably...,
the heresies endeavoured,
in one way or another,
to explain away,
the essential mystery
of God and his Christ.

As invariably,
the Church by its dogmas
honoured and protected
the mystery.

But equally...,
respecting the mystery
at the heart
of the gospel,
is “...no excuse for
not trying to understand
what it is [we’ve been given
to] understand,
particularly when
challenges to faith
raise hard questions,
demanding clarification”.
(Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* [1983], 85)

After all,
the incarnate Word –
Jesus Christ –
is God’s self-revelation –
God’s giving himself
to be known,
and more –
to be loved and worshipped
as our Lord and God.

“...no human being
can [fully] comprehend this...”,
writes the 19th Century
Danish philosopher,
Søren Kierkegaard,

“in regard to this”
he continues,
“the beginning and ending
is worship”.
(Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*,
ed. & trans. Hong & Hong [1991], 139)

*To the only wise God,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be all honour, glory,
dominion and praise,
now and forever,
Amen.
(cf., Rm 16.27; Rv 5.12f.)*