

Today we come to the second part of our sermon series on the Nicene Creed and we'll be looking at the relationship between God the Creator and Jesus the Christ. As I explained in my last sermon, this was a very difficult and contentious issue in the first few centuries of the Christian church, and became such a problem that it caused a big split.

One of the reasons it was so divisive was that people thought that wrong belief would lead to practical consequences – a people who followed a false belief would become the victims of invasion, plague, famine or worse. Moreover, they took quite literally the idea that we are one in Christ and so thought that there could be only one way of seeing the important things, like whether there was one God or several gods. To lapse into error meant not just becoming un-Christian, but to be in the clutches of the devil, like the man in today's gospel. And no church or Christian state could tolerate such errors or the presence of the devil would lead to disaster.

So, whether Jesus was one with God the Creator, or whether he was created by God and therefore a lesser creature; or whether and how he was both God and human become vitally important questions.

Everyone had an opinion. In the 380s, Gregory of Nyssa reported that in Constantinople,

Every part of the city is filled with such talk; the alleys, the crossroads, the squares, the avenues. It comes from those who sell clothes, moneychangers, grocers. If you ask a money-changer what the exchange rate is he will reply with a dissertation on the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you enquire about the quality and the price of bread, the baker will reply, "The Father is greatest and the Son subject to him" When you ask at the baths whether the water is ready, the manager will declare that "the Son came forth from nothing."

Historian Philip Jenkins has suggested that most of the people did not understand what they were talking about and that many of the church and political leaders didn't either. The theological battle was really providing the field on which a power struggle played out between the religious patriarchs and the secular rulers of Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome. People repeated the slogans they heard without understanding their philosophical basis. Tremendous ignorance was masked and replicated by political invective.

That seems eerily familiar to us today. The argument that people should use the bathroom of the sex they were assigned at birth in order to provide privacy or safety to other people is just one contemporary example. In reality, transgender people do not want to draw attention to themselves. They want safety and privacy as much as the next person, and in those places where it is the protocol for students and others to use the facilities of their gender expression, it's working just fine. But just like gay people, transgender people threaten those who want things to be like they were in the idealized 50s. By repeatedly saying trans people in the bathroom are a threat to the welfare of "normal" people, politicians and others turn voters against them and in so doing, gain allegiance for themselves.

Ignorance and prejudice concealed behind bravado and macho posturing are very dangerous. I don't pretend to know any more than you do about why the shooter in Orlando last week chose

to target a nightclub where most people were gay and Latino. But I do know that prejudiced political rhetoric creates an environment in which hate can fester. I do know that men who have been brought up to expect that they will have secure jobs and wives content to bring them their beer and slippers, are waking up to an uncomfortable new day. As a result, we are facing a backlash against the gains in women's rights and gay and transgender rights over the past few years and of course the argument keeps coming back to racism and xenophobia. When things aren't right in our world, we blame and scapegoat those who are different.

It's not easy to stand up to it. When I was river rafting a couple of weeks ago, the group had to agree whether men would pee upstream and women downstream or vice versa. Once I heard someone call out, "Men upstream, women downstream and transvestites in the middle." I'm not sure who it was and the moment passed very fast, but I wished that I could have come up with a quick response that would have explained the difference between transvestite and transgender and made the guy realize he was letting his prejudices show.

Moments like that do pass very fast, but if we are not going to stand up for those who are marginalized, who will? If we are not going to reach out to those who are different from us, who will? If we are not going to preach peace *and* walk our talk, who will?

God became incarnate in Jesus the Christ, God took on flesh, so that we might realize that hatred and fighting don't get us anywhere and that God isn't out to get us.

It was very important to our ancestors that we remained a people who followed one God and so it was important to show that Jesus the Christ was actually the same God as the Creator. That is what this whole section is about.

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.

If Jesus Christ was the same substance as the Creator then he must have been made out of the Creator – that is begotten, as we create children from our own sperm. Back then they didn't realize that women played a role in conception, they thought they just acted as the incubation chamber for the man's child. So Jesus was not made by God as he might make something else – like a dove or like humanity – but from his very own substance. And the only way to talk about that was to describe Jesus Christ as God's only Son.

This was not an attempt to establish gender – a male child from a male God – but to describe the relationship between them. They are the same, both from the same substance, if God can be said to have substance, or perhaps from the same Being. And that is unique to Christ so he is described as God's only Son. Paul talks about us as God's adopted daughters and sons in order to make the clear distinction. I don't think we need to be over-concerned about how we are God's

children just as long as we are clear that though we may be transformed into Christ-like beings and though we may have divinity within us, we are not God.

Not like Jesus was. Jesus was not a man who appeared to be God, neither was he God in a human body. He was both totally human and totally God. He is God's "only" child because he is also God, as it says "begotten not made" whereas we are made like Adam from the same atoms as the planet.

Perhaps this is not so difficult for us to think of Jesus Christ as both fully God and fully human. If we can accept that light is both particle and wave, it's not much of a jump to see that Jesus can be both God from God, Light from Light AND born the human child of a human woman, Mary.

In fact, if we think of God as being the connecting and creating force of the universe, the Being that animates all things, that which makes oak trees into oak trees and salamanders into salamanders, that which is beyond and between and behind all beings, then it is not so much of a stretch to imagine that amazing creative force becoming human and yet remaining God.

We can think of Jesus as being the human and the Christ as being the divine nature of Jesus the Christ. Jesus Christ is now clothed in glory and seated in high places on the inner planes. The Christ is both the ascended, post-resurrection Jesus *and* the Son of God from before the beginning of time. As we know from the beginning of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. John 1: 1-4

In contrast, Jesus was born as a human and lived a human life. We sometimes call him the historic Jesus – the person who existed in time and in history. There are no contemporary accounts of his life and teachings, just the gospels and other writings which were probably written at least 35 years after his death and some of them over one hundred years later. Many people have tried to identify the historic Jesus as he may have been before he was hailed as the savior of the world and they have variously seen him as itinerant healer, exceptional rabbi, teacher of wisdom, or insurgent. Who was Jesus they ask, without the Christ?

The Creed is very clear that we cannot separate the two. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, Jesus is God.

But interestingly, the Creed pays no attention to the relationship between these two persons of the Trinity. If we were writing it today, we might well want to say that God is love, and the Creator and the Word live in mutual love, obedience and creativity.

These ideas are more important to us today than whether Jesus was fully God. There are many perfectly reasonable and faithful Christians who suggest that actually he wasn't. They don't get filled with demons and have to live among the caves, nor do they call the wrath of God down upon their communities. We liberals accept that anything we say about God is actually metaphor

because we only have limited understanding. As Christians we believe that God is fully revealed in Jesus but whether that was as true when he was two as when he was thirty two we don't need to know. To call God Father and Son is as much metaphor as Creator and Word.

What is more important to us is the quality of God. What is God like?

Most of us are not philosophers. Most of us have to live in the world of business, politics and relationships, the world where moral and ethical behavior is more important than abstract ideas about the nature of the divine. And we need a new understanding God in the language and concepts of our society – an understanding that takes into account evolution and globalization, the new frontiers of science and the challenges of late capitalism. An understanding of God that speaks to the crises of our day, to hate-mongering and climate change.

So if we were writing the Creed today, I imagine that we would say that God is above all relational; that God the Creator and Word are one in Being but two in eternal relationship with each other and with the Holy Spirit. And that that relationship is characterized by love, praise, mutual respect and obedience, creativity and great joy. Because drawing both on the resources of our great tradition, the insights of mystics and the logic of philosophers and drawing upon the new understandings of the universe, this great creative work of God, that is what we see.

But such a Creed would cause great division in the Church today. Because there are those who still see God as a punishing God who makes rules and then has to be appeased when we break them. People like the minister in Sacramento who said the Orlando victims “got what they deserve” and with tremendous ignorance said “are you sad that 50 pedophiles were killed today?” Yes, we are sad and anguished by the fact that 50 young people were gunned down in an act of hate. And even if they were pedophiles which is unlikely since most pedophiles are straight, we would still be sad and anguished.

But for the preacher, Roger Jimenez, this seems to be an act of God's justice and righteousness. And he is not alone. There are many, many people whose understanding of God supports their own prejudices and hatred and even supports violence.

That is not how I understand the teachings of Jesus, and it is not how I read Creation and furthermore, it is not my personal experience of God. I see the God who Jesus called Abba and whom Jesus manifested, as one who is deeply involved in her creation, including in human society. I read of a God who calls us to love and not to resort to violence, even at great personal cost; a God who tells us to forgive again and again, even as we are forgiven again and again; and a God who tells us to pray for our enemies.

And I hear that God challenging us to stand up to the forces of hatred, anger and fear just as Jesus did. It seemed that they had the upper hand but in fact Jesus the Christ resurrected, showing us without doubt that their power is only temporary. It is up to us, the disciples of Christ to use every peaceful means at our disposal to make hatred and terror a thing of the past.

And I pray that we may have the courage to follow this loving, peaceful, relational God, to walk in the paths of Jesus the Christ who was truly God but also truly human and so showed us how

we too might be truly human and also live the divine life of the one in who we live and move and have our being.