

Who
Jesus Was
and Is

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Cited passages from the Bible will be presented in italic type, with verse numbers omitted for ease of reading. Unless otherwise stated the version used will be the World English Bible, which is available on the internet and stated to be in the public domain.

DEDICATION

To my son Peter, whose 2019 Christmas present (Rowan William's *Christ the Heart of Creation*) started me off on an impossible project. And to my friend Stephen, who encouraged me to give it a go.

PREFACE

My working title for this book was 'Understanding Jesus: Christological Meditations'. Now, as you can see, I have chosen something a tad simpler. My website states that all my writings are an attempt to present deep Christian concepts in a simple way for the general reader. So far I have published short books: On Being Human; Genesis Revisited in the light of modern science; Angels and Demons; Priestcraft and Magic; The Tram Question, examining predestination; The Cross, asking the right questions; and The Extra Gospels, looking at the non-canonical gospels. Weighty topics dealt with in short books, with necessary passages cited within the text so that the reader does not have to look elsewhere, and with internet links to where further reading may take place.

And now I am tackling what is the very core of the religion we call Christianity. That is why I remind the reader that this is no more than a brief introduction to a very deep topic. It is not an academic study, and it is a personal approach with no doubt many faults. My website (johneverettbooks.co.uk) gives a link to respond if you wish to. I pray that reading this short book, with all its shortcomings, may yet prove to be worthwhile.

John Everett – Summer 2020

Introduction

In 325 well over 300 Christian bishops met at a place, in what is now Turkey, called Nicaea. They ended up producing the first version of what we now call the Nicene creed. Every Sunday I, along with countless others, recite this creed, with its definition (among other things) of who Jesus is.

What Christians now call the doctrine of the Trinity has as its cornerstone the assertion that Jesus is both human and divine. Note the present tense: not 'who Jesus was' but 'who Jesus is.' This, however, does not preclude us asking questions about who Jesus was during His lifetime on this earth. We can also think about how the understanding of who Jesus was/is developed over time.

So this is an attempt to think about this question.

I need to emphasise a few things right at the beginning: this is not a piece of systematic theology. My answers will be imperfect, and not even scholarly. Here you will find a set of meditations, by someone who became a Christian at the age of 21 in 1960. I have spent two decades teaching Christianity in school to teenagers, a further set of decades running a business, and two more decades in semi-retirement. At the age of 82 I have done a lot of thinking, and have followed writing a school text book on the life of Christ, published in the 1960s, with several more books on Christian themes available on my website as

an eBook, and also in print. I regard this current book as the boldest writing I have attempted so far, and I approach the task with understandable trepidation. Our first task in responding to the love Jesus has for us is to worship Him. But He also challenged us to love God with ‘all our mind.’ This means that we are allowed, at the very least, to think about the imponderable concepts of the Trinitarian description of our Lord. If we describe someone as a ‘perfect human’ it implies that we understand what we mean by ‘human’. Even more of a problem, if we have a category we call ‘divine’, what does it mean to call some entity ‘God’, with a capital G. All this will be duly explored, imperfectly, in what follows. The process here will be historical. It will begin with questions about how the first followers of Jesus viewed Him, as evidenced in the canonical gospels, then in apostolic letters, then in the patristic writings, and finally in the ecumenical councils. In other words from the very beginning up until we arrive at the revised version of the Nicene creed. These chapters will be meditations on the topic selected, but no more: certainly not answers.

The Gospel of Mark

Mark begins his account of the earthly life of Jesus with a bold statement::

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [Mark 1:1]

So we are presented, without explanation, with two key titles: ‘Christ’, which is the Greek word used wherever the Hebrew ‘Messiah’ is intended, and ‘Son of God’, which bring us straight into the obvious question: ‘what did early Christians mean when they called Jesus this?’

By way of contrast with the gospel narratives of Luke and Matthew, Mark begins his account of the Messiah, the Son of God, with the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah, and his encounter with that person.

As it is written in the prophets, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you: the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!’” John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching the baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. All the country of Judea and all those of Jerusalem went out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan river, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He preached, saying, “After me comes

he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and loosen. I baptized you in water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.” In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up from the water, he saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. A voice came out of the sky, “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” [Mark 1:2-11]

We may wonder why Mark saw no need to talk about the birth and childhood of Jesus. Did Jesus have a totally ordinary birth, childhood, and early manhood? Did the descending of the Holy Spirit empower Him in a way He had not previously been empowered? Did Jesus somehow at this point of time *become* God’s Son in whom God was well pleased?

We are faced at this point with a mode of thinking that became a point of contention in the early church. There were those who taught that Jesus was an ordinary man who was *adopted* by God as His Son at this point in time; that He was thus elevated from humanity to divinity. If the only evidence you had was the Gospel of Mark, that was not an unreasonable position to take. The early church had more evidence than Mark, of course, and this adoptionist explanation was roundly condemned as inadequate. But we need to note that it existed.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke answers the question we posed in the previous chapter. Jesus was literally God's Son: Jesus was conceived in the womb of His mother as a direct result of God's action.

Now in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man whose name was Joseph, of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. Having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, you highly favored one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered what kind of salutation this might be. The angel said to her, "Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and shall name him Jesus.' He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever. There will be no end to his Kingdom." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, seeing I am a virgin?" The angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore also the holy one who is born from you will be called the Son of God. Behold, Elizabeth your relative also has conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing spoken by God is impossible." Mary said, "Behold, the servant of the Lord; let it be done to me according

to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. [Luke 1:26-38]

What I find interesting about this passage is that the early church seems to have paid little attention to it. For instance Paul, though he mentions that Jesus was a descendant of David, and so being a member of the royal line of Judah, makes no mention of His mother by name. This is how Paul opens his letter to the Romans:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Good News of God, which he promised before through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of the offspring of David according to the flesh, who was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we received grace and apostleship for obedience of faith among all the nations for his name’s sake; among whom you are also called to belong to Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [Rom 1:1-7]

No mention of Jesus’ mother by name. In fact, outside of the four canonical gospels, Mary the mother of Jesus is mentioned but once (Acts 1:14). The New Testament – outside the gospels – seems to care very little for the idea that the virgin conception

of Jesus is a vital part of Christian understanding of who Jesus was. Paul again:

Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no more. [2 Cor 5:16]

Later generations of Christians saw this differently. Many accounts were recorded about the virgin Mary in the extra-canonical writings, and whole doctrines were developed in some parts of the church about her: her immaculate conception and her miraculous assumption, to name but two.

As we can see from Paul's opening greeting to the Christians in Rome, Jesus' resurrection and ascension are presented as the real confirmation of who Jesus is. More of this later.

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's gospel opens thus:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

The genealogy is then traced from Abraham onward, ending with:

Jacob became the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. [Matt 1:1 & 16]

This picks up Paul's phrase noted above, 'born of the offspring of David according to the flesh', but interestingly regarding Joseph's descent from David as relevant. But Matthew is happy to confirm the reality of the virgin conception:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was like this: After his mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, before they came together, she was found pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man, and not willing to make her a public example, intended to put her away secretly. But when he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, don't be afraid to take to yourself Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She shall give birth to a son. You shall name him Jesus, for it is he who shall save his people from their sins."

Now all this has happened that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall give birth to a son. They shall call his name Immanuel," which is, being interpreted, "God with us." [Matt 1:18-23]

As something of an aside, when Luke includes a genealogy of Jesus the list is different, although the royal David is included:

Jesus himself, when he began to teach, was about thirty years old, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, . . . [Luke 3:23]

A possible explanation for the difference notes that after the word Joseph the Greek has simply 'of Heli', and it is possible that Heli was being stated as the father of Mary, and so the genealogy is that of Mary and not of Joseph.

Both gospel writers regard it as important to place Jesus as a descendant of King David. In the gospels the title 'Son of David' is used of Jesus as a messianic title regularly. Also it is worth noting that in the Revelation given to John this title comes three times [Rev 3:7, 5:5, 22:16].

So Matthew, like Mark, has the claim that Jesus is the Messiah in his very first line.

Jesus as a boy

The gospel of Luke is the only canonical source we have about the boy Jesus. But the inquiring mind wishes we knew more. The gospels tell us that Jesus grew up naturally, as is evidenced by the surprise that was expressed by the people of His home town of Nazareth when Jesus ministered there:

When Jesus had finished these parables, he departed from there. Coming into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? Aren't all of his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all of these things?" They were offended by him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country and in his own house." He didn't do many mighty works there because of their unbelief. [Matt 13:53-58]

The complaint was that since Jesus was just an ordinary carpenter's son, whose extended family they knew well enough, what right did He have to style Himself as a teacher, and more? This is in sharp contrast with the obviously invented pseudo-gospels that were to appear a century and more later. If you wish to review these stories, with the boy Jesus doing preposterous things like turning mud shaped birds into living birds who fly away, you could do worse

that check out my ‘*The Extra Gospels*’, which you can download from my website. No, the evidence from Matthew is that the boy Jesus appeared as a normal boy, educated locally, and probably until the age of thirty helping Joseph in his carpentry trade.

There is one indication, from Luke, of the hidden depths in Jesus as a boy.

When they [Joseph and Mary] had accomplished all things that were according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. The child was growing, and was becoming strong in spirit, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. His parents went every year to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast; and when they had fulfilled the days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. Joseph and his mother didn't know it, but supposing him to be in the company, they went a day's journey; and they looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they didn't find him, they returned to Jerusalem, looking for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the middle of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When they saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I were anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" They didn't understand the saying which he spoke to them. And he went down with

them and came to Nazareth. He was subject to them, and his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. [Luke 2:39-52]

This is all we have to help us understand this basic question: how did the boy Jesus come to understand who He was? At the age of twelve He refers to the temple in Jerusalem as ‘His Father’s house’. So God is His Father. At the age of twelve, Jesus believed this.

Only Mary and Joseph knew of the very special way in which He was conceived. At what age did they begin to explain to Him that His birth was unique? Did He search the scriptures to find the passage talking about a virgin conceiving and bearing a son who would be called ‘God with us’? Did Mary and Joseph tell him how as a baby He was recognized as Saviour by Simeon and Anna?

Behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. He came in the Spirit into the temple. When the parents brought in the child, Jesus, that they might do concerning him according to the custom of the law, then he received him into his arms and blessed God, and said, “Now you are releasing your servant, Master, according to your word, in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all peoples;

a light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.” Joseph and his mother were marveling at the things which were spoken concerning him. Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary, his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which is spoken against. Yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” There was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher (she was of a great age, having lived with a husband seven years from her virginity, and she had been a widow for about eighty-four years), who didn’t depart from the temple, worshiping with fastings and petitions night and day. Coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of him to all those who were looking for redemption in Jerusalem. [Luke 2:25-38]

These questions about Jesus’ self-awareness, which must have been a gradual process from whatever early age any human being begins to develop the capacity for self-awareness, are imponderable. And we are taken to a further, deeper, question: how did Jesus work out what was His mission on earth? What had God His Father sent Him to do?

Jesus' Understanding of His Mission

Confining ourselves to the evidence from the gospels, we have an obvious starting point in how Mark records what Jesus did at the very beginning of His ministry:

Now after John was taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Good News of God's Kingdom, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and God's Kingdom is at hand! Repent, and believe in the Good News." [Mark 1:14-15]

Jesus had come to bring God's Kingdom on earth. He said that the 'time has come'. This is the pivotal moment in history. God is becoming present on earth to establish His rule here.

We must never lose sight of this fundamental agenda proclamation if we are to answer our basic question aright. Trouble is, it raises another question: what is God's Kingdom, and how can it be established on this earth? We have at least a partial answer in the prayer Jesus gave His followers: we are to pray 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' When God's will is being done, God's kingship is being established.

A rather longer statement of the purposes of Jesus' ministry comes from Luke, who records a more detailed announcement, again at the very beginning, immediately after His baptism by John and His spell alone facing the Enemy's temptations:

When the devil had completed every temptation, he departed from him until another time. Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and news about him spread through all the surrounding area. He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. He entered, as was his custom, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. The book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He opened the book, and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to deliver those who are crushed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." [Luke 4:13-21]

The coming of God's kingdom will mean broken hearts healed, captives released, the blind given their sight, the crushed delivered, and God's acceptable year proclaimed. The gospels recount how Jesus did precisely all of the above. The blind did receive their sight, demons were cast out, unhappy people were able to rejoice again, the sick were healed, and by His preaching God's law was better understood. The immediate reaction in Nazareth was rejection: how dare a mere carpenter's son make such preposterous claims? Jesus managed to escape their murderous

anger, but only just, as Luke records immediately after the passage cited above.

As we read through all the familiar narratives of Jesus' actions up until his arrest, we can do well to remember that He had stated His agenda quite clearly. Did Jesus also understand His ministry to have more components than these? Did He foresee how it would all end? And was that ending all part of God's plan? We will return to this theme in due course.

Authority

If we are to understand the impact that Jesus' early ministry had we cannot ignore that His very manner of speaking and acting impressed everyone. Mark tells us of His first actions immediately after choosing some fishermen to follow Him:

They went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath day he entered into the synagogue and taught. They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as having authority, and not as the scribes. Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, saying, "Ha! What do we have to do with you, Jesus, you Nazarene? Have you come to destroy us? I know you who you are: the Holy One of God!" Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!" The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching? For with authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!" The report of him went out immediately everywhere into all the region of Galilee and its surrounding area. [Mark 1:21-28]

And a few days later:

When he entered again into Capernaum after some days, it was heard that he was at home. Immediately many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even around the door; and he spoke the word to them. Four people

came, carrying a paralytic to him. When they could not come near to him for the crowd, they removed the roof where he was. When they had broken it up, they let down the mat that the paralytic was lying on. Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you." But there were some of the scribes sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak blasphemies like that? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, said to them, "Why do you reason these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to tell the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven;' or to say, 'Arise, and take up your bed, and walk?' But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I tell you, arise, take up your mat, and go to your house." He arose, and immediately took up the mat and went out in front of them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" [Mark 2:1-12]

Jesus' understanding of Himself is clear: He has authority to cast out demons and to forgive sins. And we can also note that He refers to Himself by the title 'Son of Man'. This title comes well over twenty times in the gospel of Matthew alone, and 81 times all told in the whole New Testament. Did Jesus use this title to emphasise His true humanity? This is entirely possible. But there is a possibility that He was using it to tie in with this passage from the Old Testament:

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that which will not be destroyed. [Daniel 7:13-14]

If this is so, then Jesus was making an important claim, basing His life’s work and identity on a prophetic passage that many of His hearers would recognise.

On the subject of authority it is worth noting two more passages, one in which Jesus passed on His authority to cast out demons and heal the sick to His followers [Matt 10:1], and another in this dramatic statement after His resurrection, that all authority has been given to Him in heaven and on earth [Matt 28:18].

We can understand why Jesus might wait until after His resurrection to claim to have all authority in heaven, but during His earthly lifetime He acted with a very special authority over earthly matters. This is particularly so with the Jewish Law as revealed in Moses’ time. Here are extracts from what we call the sermon on the mount:

“Don’t think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn’t come to destroy, but to fulfill. ... You have heard that

it was said to the ancient ones, 'You shall not murder;' and 'Whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgment. Whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' will be in danger of the council. Whoever says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna. ... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery;' but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. ... Again you have heard that it was said to the ancient ones, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall perform to the Lord your vows,' but I tell you, don't swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God; nor by the earth, for it is the footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Neither shall you swear by your head, for you can't make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.' Whatever is more than these is of the evil one. ... You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, don't resist him who is evil; but whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone sues you to take away your coat, let him have your cloak also. Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and don't turn away him who desires to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. ... Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. [Matt 5:17-48]

The repeated phrase ‘it was said of old, but I say to you...’ makes it clear that Jesus is claiming to have authority to explain the true meanings of the original laws. The concluding comment at the end of this ‘sermon’ is telling:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the multitudes were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them with authority, and not like the scribes. [Matt 7:28-29]

We can understand how this claim to have authority made by Jesus would inevitably bring Him into conflict with the existing authorities in Judaea. Here was a rival they could not tolerate, and would need to silence. We need to read the gospel narratives with this undercurrent of opposition always in mind.

There were four strands of those who would feel threatened: the Herodians, who had compromised with the Romans to have their leader, Herod Antipas, installed as a puppet monarch; the hereditary priests, with their Chief Priest leading the people’s worship from the Temple; the Pharisees, who believed that if the nation would all follow God’s Law, the Torah, perfectly then God would be induced to intervene; and finally those who felt that the Romans should be overthrown by military action.

Jesus' Humanity

When we read the gospel narratives we come across so many passages where Jesus performed what are easily called 'wonders'. Better to use that word rather than 'supernatural', since the latter implies conclusions we prefer to avoid. John in his gospel calls them 'signs', events that reveal significant facts about Jesus.

So the question arises: should we understand these signs and wonders as evidence that Jesus was more than human?

It is possible to assert that the answer to this question is No. Jesus said that what He was doing was possible for any follower who had faith:

When they came to the multitude, a man came to him, kneeling down to him and saying, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is epileptic and suffers grievously; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. So I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him." Jesus answered, "Faithless and perverse generation! How long will I be with you? How long will I bear with you? Bring him here to me." Jesus rebuked the demon, and it went out of him, and the boy was cured from that hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately, and said, "Why weren't we able to cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your unbelief. For most certainly I tell you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will tell this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and

nothing will be impossible for you. But this kind doesn't go out except by prayer and fasting.” [Matt 17:14-21]

And Paul echoes this mountain moving phrase:

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don't have love, I am nothing. [1 Cor 13:2]

So it is possible to see the signs and wonders performed by Jesus as being those of a human being filled with the Holy Spirit and a huge measure of faith. In the Acts of the Apostles we even read of apparently dead people being restored to life by an apostle [Acts 9:36-41, 20:9-10]. To believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and certainly His close followers and many others did, is not to say that He was any more than a very special person. ‘Son of David’, as Jesus was often called, implies that He was thought to be their Messiah, but David was a human king, and no more than that.

Jesus predicts His death

The gospels make it quite clear that Jesus knew how His earthly life would end. The gospel of Matthew records that before His final visit to Jerusalem, which resulted in His actual arrest, trials, and execution, He warned the Twelve that He would be executed.

Now when Jesus came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" They said, "Some say John the Baptizer, some, Elijah, and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jonab, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. I also tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my assembly, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven." Then he commanded the disciples that they should tell no one that he was Jesus the Christ. From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This will never be done to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to

me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men.” [Matt 16:13-23]

While they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered up into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and the third day he will be raised up.” They were exceedingly sorry. [Matt 17:22-23]

As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and will hand him over to the Gentiles to mock, to scourge, and to crucify; and the third day he will be raised up.” [Matt 20:17-19]

These predictions are echoed in Mark and Luke as well, so there can be no doubt that Jesus knew what waited Him when He eventually made His last trip to Jerusalem. We need also to note that all three predictions are linked to His status as the Messiah of God. Particularly so in the first. It was when Peter, no doubt speaking for all of the twelve, made it clear that he recognised Jesus to be more than a prophet: the actual Messiah God had promised His people. But Peter could not bear the thought of a crucified Messiah, and Jesus saw this as an unwitting attempt to divert Him from God’s path. In other words Jesus saw His eventual crucifixion as part of God’s plan for what He was to achieve in His earthly lifetime.

This is confirmed on the eve of the event when Jesus, after the Last Supper with the twelve, struggled in mental anguish at the prospect.

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and severely troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with me." He went forward a little, fell on his face, and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass away from me; nevertheless, not what I desire, but what you desire." He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What, couldn't you watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray, that you don't enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, a second time he went away and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cup can't pass away from me unless I drink it, your desire be done." He came again and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. He left them again, went away, and prayed a third time, saying the same words. Then he came to his disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Arise, let's be going. Behold, he who betrays me is at hand." [Matt 26:36-46]

It was during the Last Supper, of course, that Jesus had given His followers a symbolic way of remembering, celebrating even, this event, and

explaining its purpose: the establishment of a new relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins.

As they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks for it, and broke it. He gave to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave to them, saying, "All of you drink it, for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the remission of sins. [Matt 26:26-28]

This is why the cross has become the most widespread symbol of Christianity, and the Eucharist, in which the above words of Jesus are repeated, the most frequently used ceremonial.

I have discussed how 'the Cross' has this great importance in a short book of that name available from my website, so I will not repeat all that discussion here. It is a deep and complex topic, and I recommend prayerful thinking and contemplation of it.

John

So far all the citations from the gospels have been from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the so-called synoptic gospels, because they follow a similar pattern of narrative, often using the very same words. They clearly shared many of the same original sources, no doubt by verbal repetition before being committed to writing. Luke referred to the many sources he had used in the opening sentence of his account of the earthly life of Jesus. Many books have been written presenting theories about this inter-dependency, and there is no space to repeat them here.

John's gospel is different. It is presumed that he was familiar with the synoptic gospels, and did not intend to simply add a fourth similar writing.

John writes with a different purpose [see John 20:31], and his purpose is theological. He wants to answer the question that asks who Jesus was very much more explicitly. He even begins with the answer to that question in the familiar passage we hear every Christmas:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him. Without him, nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness hasn't overcome it. There came a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came as a witness, that

he might testify about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but was sent that he might testify about the light. The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own, and those who were his own didn't receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and lived among us. We saw his glory, such glory as of the only born Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. John testified about him. He cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me, for he was before me.'" From his fullness we all received grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God at any time. The only born Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has declared him.

[John 1:1-18]

This translation has 'only born' where other translations have 'only begotten'. Looking at other translations of verse 18 we have:

No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

[KJV]

Nobody has ever seen God. The only-begotten God, who is intimately close to the father – he has brought him to light.
[Tom Wright]

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. [NIV]

However translated, the intention is to express a connection between the Son and the Father that makes them of the same kind, or, to use the philosophical term that the Nicene creed uses, of the same substance. Later, as we shall see, there was much debate among Christians about whether there was a time when ‘the Word who is also the Son’ did not exist, or was there no such time: the Father and the Son have both no beginning, both are co-eternal.

John’s narrative is obviously presented as further indications of the closeness of the Son with the Father. The events he narrates are often described as signs, or indications of who Jesus truly is.

If we ask the question as to whether Jesus would have understood this identity during His human lifetime, John provides us with further indications.

The first to note comes within a confrontation with certain Jews:

It was the Feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in Solomon’s porch. The Jews therefore came around him and said to him,

“How long will you hold us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you don’t believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name, these testify about me. But you don’t believe, because you are not of my sheep, as I told you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give eternal life to them. They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all. No one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” Therefore the Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of those works do you stone me?” The Jews answered him, “We don’t stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” Jesus answered them, “Isn’t it written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods?’ If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture can’t be broken), do you say of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You blaspheme,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God?’ If I don’t do the works of my Father, don’t believe me. But if I do them, though you don’t believe me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.” They sought again to seize him, and he went out of their hand. [John 10:22-39]

The second passage to note on this topic is the record of another conversation, this time with His disciples:

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, you know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you such a long time, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How do you say, 'Show us the Father? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I tell you, I speak not from myself; but the Father who lives in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; or else believe me for the very works' sake. [John 14:5-11]

I think we can safely say that Jesus believed that He was actually the embodiment of the Father. The Father was in Him, so that whoever had seen Him had seen the Father in human form. Like every Jew of the first century, Jesus would know that to see God as He truly is would be impossible. The God of Heaven is not physical, tangible, or visible. Hence the earlier assertion that no one has ever seen God. But Jesus knew that as far as it was possible to see God at all, seeing Himself was all that might be achieved.

How far did Jesus' understanding of Himself go? Once, when debating with Jews who were obviously not friendly, we have this passage:

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say that he is our God. You have not known him, but I know him. If I said, 'I don't know him,' I would be like you, a liar. But I know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad." The Jews therefore said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old! Have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most certainly, I tell you, before Abraham came into existence, I AM." [John 8:54-58]

As we read on from here we find that this declaration incensed those there so much that they attempted to stone Jesus. But Jesus escaped. As far as those hearing these words were concerned Jesus had committed blasphemy by using the sacred name of YHWH, 'I am', of Himself, and claiming to pre-exist even Abraham. This is an intentional echoing of the passage where YHWH reveals His name to Moses:

Moses said to God, "Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what should I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM," and he said, "You shall tell the children of Israel this: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " [Exodus 3:13-14]

John's gospel is thought to have been written towards the close of the first century, and represents mature Christian thinking. There are also three letters attributed to the apostle John, and some scholars

reckon that the first was written to accompany the gospel he wrote. There are signs in the letters of early misunderstandings of the nature of Jesus. The most obvious of these is called Docetism, and is typical of the generally Gnostic divergences from orthodoxy. In the general Gnostic view that matter is evil and only the spirit is good, their view therefore was that the Son of God could not be truly human, really physical and material. The original Greek word *doket* simply means ‘seems’. Docetists proclaimed that Jesus merely seemed to be truly and physically human. The way that John opened his first letter explicitly stated the contrary:

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we saw, and our hands touched, concerning the Word of life (and the life was revealed, and we have seen, and testify, and declare to you the life, the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was revealed to us); that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us. Yes, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. [1 John 1:1-3]

Note the explicit ‘hands have touched’. Jesus was no mere apparition, He was physically audible, visible, and tangible. But He was also the Word of life, using the same divine designation that comes in the first verses of the gospel as well.

Paul

In terms of chronology, the earliest writings of the New Testament that we have are the letters of Paul. They represent the understanding of Jesus that was possessed by the first generation of Christians. Most local gatherings of Christians were either mixed Jews and non-Jews, or, as in Jerusalem, very nearly all Jews. What distinguished them from other Jews was their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the promised Messiah. The nick-name Christian means Messiah-people.

Before we look at Paul's understanding of Jesus we need to remind ourselves of his deeply monotheistic Jewish background. Here is how he describes himself:

. . . circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee. [Phil 3:5]

In other words, about as orthodox in religious terms as any Jew of that era could be. Here, in the same letter just cited, is what he proclaims about Jesus:

Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to

the point of death, yes, the death of the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [Phil 2:5-11]

Jesus is Lord, the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to designate God Himself. In English translations it is placed in capitals (the LORD) to ensure that this is properly understood. Jesus is to be worshiped as LORD, the one who became truly human by emptying Himself of his divine status, to be even susceptible, as all humans are, of dying.

There is very little difference in true meaning between this assertion and that of John's prologue (the Word became flesh and dwelt among us).

Other passages from Paul's letters have the same basic message; here is one of them:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created in the heavens and on the earth, visible things and invisible things, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things are held together. He is the head of the body, the assembly, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the preeminence. For all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all

things to himself by him, whether things on the earth or things in the heavens, having made peace through the blood of his cross. [Col 1:15-20]

The word reconcile here reminds us of one simple statement made by Paul:

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. [2 Cor 5:19]

Simplify this statement even further: *God was in Christ*. God became human, as Jesus of Nazareth. This is Paul's theology, and so that too of the earliest Christians.

This chapter on Paul's christology could be extended to fill a whole book, and such books have already been written. What I am hoping to do is simply hit the highlights, to show that an ardent monotheist like Paul could believe that God Himself took on human form.

The Apostles' Creed

This creed is the simplest and shortest of the various creeds by which the Christian Church defines what it believes in. Here is a recent English version:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

It is Trinitarian in format, reflecting the baptismal formula we find at the end of Matthew's gospel: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It is difficult to be sure how old this formulation is. It gives the appearance of being early, certainly first century, but in the form we have here the earliest citation comes in the year 390, in a letter probably written by Ambrose in Milan to Pope Siricius. There are earlier, shorter still, versions quoted by Tertullian in various letters he wrote around the year 200.

Early traditions about this creed explain that the original 12 Apostles added one sentence each, hence

the name 'Apostles' Creed'. But there is no sure historical evidence that this actually happened.

What is noteworthy is what it lacks: there is no attempt to define the relationship that the Son and the Spirit have with the Father. It is enough that their activity is described. If you believed all this you would qualify to be baptized as a Christian.

And yet as time passed, leading up to the Council of Nicaea, there were Christian leaders denouncing and excommunicating other Christian leaders over differing interpretations of exactly this question. How does the Son, how does the Holy Spirit, relate to God the Father? Are they co-existent, co-equal, do they share the same essence? Or not? These quarrels were not trivial, and it was my original plan to recount them in enough detail for them to be a sort of history of theological diversity in the first four centuries of Christendom. I read again (for at least the third time) my copy of the book affectionately known as *Dads and Cads* ('Fathers and Heretics' by G. L. Prestige).

After several weeks of reflection I have decided not to relate in detail the various heresies that arose, and how they were challenged. It would merely summarise the book I have cited. Instead I will proceed on a more personal basis. No doubt it is too bold to be useful, but notwithstanding that, I am going to offer my own imperfect reflections.

A Key Verse

The essential position adopted in the philosophical words used in the Nicene creed, especially in its later revised form, is that Jesus is Perfect Man and Perfect God. The assertion is that Jesus and the Father share the same essence, or substance, or being. The Greek word is *homoousion* (same being) and this was finally adopted rather than *homoiousion* (similar being) after a lot of furious debate. Just one, very small, letter different. My own stance is determined by a key saying of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 11:27.

No one knows the Son, except the Father; neither does anyone know the Father, except the Son and he to whom the Son desires to reveal him.

How could Jesus possibly be both truly God (eternal, incomprehensible, all-knowing) and at the same time be truly human (temporal, physical, limited in knowledge)? Answer: only the Father can answer this question. No mortal can.

Who knows the Father perfectly, so as to be able to understand Him as He truly is? The Son does, but no mortal can. However the Son can enable some to come to a better understanding of who God is than they would be able to without the Son's help. As Jesus said: 'he who has seen me has seen the Father.' It is only by contemplating Jesus, and all He did and said, that we can get a better idea of who the Father

is. Not a perfect understanding, that is beyond us in this life, where we see only imperfect images, as if in a clouded mirror, to use Paul's phrase. In this present life we know only in part. Later, face to face, we will know fully [1 Cor. 13:12].

The Council of Nicaea was established more for a political purpose than a theological one. The Emperor Constantine wanted to use the leaders of the Christian Church as a sort of civil service. In many cities, in spite of intermittent persecution, this was already something of a reality, especially with regard to support for the local poor and sick. Now that he had brought this persecution to an end, Constantine could get the bishops from all over his empire to assemble and settle their differences. The differences were rather too profound for comfort. Constantine needed a united organisation for his political purposes.

Managing Discord

When Paul established new communities of recent converts he appointed elders, or to use the original word, presbyters (the Greek for an elder is *presbyteros*). He was following a similar way in which a Jewish synagogue might be structured. The early church in Jerusalem had found the need to appoint seven deacons (the Greek for a steward, or servant, is *diakonos*). Thus the early Christian church had two levels of authority and responsibility, pastoral and practical.

There was another way to define a presbyter, and that was bishop (from the Greek *episkopos*, which can be translated literally as overseer). It would seem that originally the two titles were interchangeable. Thus when Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi, he opens with this salutation:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and servants: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [Phil 1:1-2]

The key words in Greek are *episkopos* and *diakonos*. Note the plural for overseers, obvious more than one, as well as for servants. Paul's presbyters might just as easily be called bishops. When he wrote to Timothy about how to organise the Church in Ephesus, he referred only to two categories, bishops and deacons

[see 1Tim 3:1-13]. On his way to Jerusalem for the last time he had bypassed Ephesus, but had asked the presbyters to call on him at Miletus.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to himself the elders of the assembly. [Acts 20:17]

As part of his exhortations to them he called them bishops (overseers):

Take heed, therefore, to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [Acts 20:28]

Obviously to Paul the terms elder and overseer, presbyter and bishop, were interchangeable.

The very early Christian church had no central organisation, of course. As a text called the Didache, written probably around the end of the first century, makes clear, there was both local administration and mobile or itinerant teaching. The Didache gives advice to the local pastors as to how to handle the itinerant ones.

It is also clear how the early churches met. They would meet in private houses rather than dedicated buildings, every first day of the week, to celebrate the memorial of Jesus' Last Supper, which they called the Eucharist (a Greek word meaning thanksgiving). In any large city, especially one as large as Rome, there would be many such assemblies. Each would be led by a presbyter. It is likely that such gatherings, as time

went on, would take on a particular focus, either by the language of the participants (in Rome this would include Christians whose first language might be Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, or whatever), or by some other shared characteristic (such as social differences between slaves and freedmen).

Some of these separate gatherings might also arise by the selective choice of a particular leader, who had attracted a gathering by virtue of inspiring teaching. As we study the history of heresy we can see examples of this. Marcion was the son of a bishop in the province of Pontus (south coast of the Black Sea) and was a presbyter in Rome around 130. He had very strong views about Judaism and proclaimed that Christianity should cut off all association with its Jewish background. He accepted only a small proportion of the generally (by now) accepted canon of the New Testament (an edited copy of the gospel of Luke and most of Paul's letters). He gained a wide following, but was condemned by other leaders of the churches in Rome and eventually excommunicated in 144.

What happened with Marcion is typical of nearly all the heresies that the early church had to deal with. A strong local leader, preaching a distinctive message, and eventually condemned by other leaders. We usually know a great deal more about these distinctive messages from the condemnations that were written against them than from any writings of their heretic

authors that have survived. Retrospective selection of what was worth preserving is very powerful.

Another factor in this brief review of early discord is the way in which the terms presbyter and bishop evolved. By the beginning of the second century it was becoming the case that where there were several local presbyters just one might be deemed their leader, and thus their overseer – bishop. During the second century monarchical bishops became the norm, and some important cities also regarded that their bishop had authority of other bishops of the same region. They became metropolitan archbishops, or patriarchs. This applied to Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and later to Constantinople. The date when this kind of super authority became recognised is difficult to establish. For instance, when Clement wrote to the church at Corinth, in a letter written towards the end of the first century, the author advocates that the Corinthians submit to their presbyters (which was what the dispute he was addressing was about), and uses the terms presbyter and bishop interchangeably. Clement makes no attempt to establish that a presbyter/bishop from Rome had any special authority to determine issues, merely to exhort an appropriate resolution. Most scholars place the date when monarchical bishops became the norm much later, say the middle of the second century. This is a rather thorny bit of history, and I have found that I can usually tell the interior motives of a historian from how they treat the topic of the claim that the

Bishop of Rome has a universal authority. It is almost impossible for any writer to be totally objective, and this is no doubt true of me as of anyone else.

What is clear is that by 325, the date of the First World Wide Council, the convener was not a bishop, but rather the emperor. It would take a vote of the majority of the bishops who did attend to determine outcomes, but the council itself was chaired by the emperor Constantine.

The creeds

What we today call the Nicene Creed had its first draft at the 325 Council of Nicaea, but its more usual form was extended and revised in 381 in a further world wide council held in Constantinople. The extensions were focused on the definition of Jesus' relationship with the Father, and additional credal statements were added about Jesus.

The key omission was how the original 325 creed had concluded:

But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

These anathemas had been very specific to the Arian controversy, which had been the main reason for the gathering of all these bishops in the first place. More about Arius and his teachings in due course.

The first, and now extended, part of the Constantinople statement has:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds (æons), Light of

*Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made,
consubstantial with the Father;*

by whom all things were made;

*who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from
heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the
Virgin Mary, and was made man;*

*he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered,
and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to
the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the
right hand of the Father;*

*from thence he shall come again, with glory, to judge the
quick and the dead.*

Whose kingdom shall have no end.

The translation cited is that of the Wikipedia article on the Nicene Creed, which also gives the original Greek text. The key word is consubstantial. The original Greek was homoousion (ὁμοούσιον), and a more current translation of this Greek word would be ‘of one being’.

Debate about the kind of human existence Jesus had continued in the early church, as they tried to understand how human nature could also be divine. So a further council met in Chalcedon in 451. The agreed definition from this council, translation again from Wikipedia, is as follows:

*We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent,
teach people to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus
Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in*

manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.

This complex credal statement highlights the deep difficulty the Christian thinkers of this age had. How could Jesus be at the same time perfect man and perfect God? Totally human (with all the limitations that implies) and totally divine (and therefore with no limitations)?

Arius was just such a Christian thinker. He was a presbyter in Alexandria. He is dated as having lived between 250 and 336. He built up quite a significant following, teaching the supremacy of God the Father and that therefore the human Son was bound to be subordinate to the Father. He taught that though begotten of the Father there was a time when He was not. Hence the Nicene anathemas. He was opposed by his metropolitan bishop Athanasius, and the debate became so divisive across many congregations in Egypt and Syria that it was clear that there would have to be some way to resolve it. Hence Nicaea.

It is not part of my plan to fill out the history of these doctrinal problems, other than to note that the depth of them is indicated by the fact that churches loyal to Arius and his teachings continued to exist for several centuries after Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. There is a real possibility that mainstream Christianity could have ended up Arian, and there are denominations, or call them sects if you like, today that are essentially Arian, while claiming to be Christian.

Other later creeds have emerged. Particularly worth noting is what is commonly called the Athanasian Creed. This is not really a creed, more a teaching document, and was not written by Athanasius. No one knows exactly when it was first published, in the sixth or seventh century being the best guess. It sits in the Church of England Book of Common Prayer, with the instruction that it be used instead of the Apostles' Creed on certain dates. Originally written in Latin, it expands even more the formulae we find in the Chalcedon text. It is rather long, and begins:

WHOSOEVER will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.

Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal.

[Cited from churchofengland.org]

I have cited it for the reason that it gives us a good instance of an important word in all our focus on how to understand the Trinity. The word is ‘person’.

Blessed Trinity

There is a hymn whose first line is ‘Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!’ and the first and last verses end with ‘God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!’ It was written in the early 1800s by the Rector of Hodnet parish church (near Shrewsbury), Reginald Heber.

We noted above the important word ‘person’ in the so-called Athanasian Creed, and here it is again rather emphatically. The English word originates from the Latin word *persona*. In Latin theatrical productions the actors had a custom that we would find quite strange if used in our theatres. Remember Latin theatres were large and open air, so the audience would be seated a long way from the actors. A single actor in Roman theatres could play several parts. To indicate which part he was currently playing he would hold up a mask in front of his face. A different mask for each character. The Latin for this mask is *persona*. One actor, different masks, hence different characters in the play.

One God, three Persons. The same God, but different activities: creation, salvation, indwelling; above, alongside, within; Father, Son, Spirit.

A concluding personal thought: the subject I have been studying goes beyond simple logic. The heresies we have noted arose because of a demand for greater logic than we can adhere to. Perfect God and Perfect Man. If you stress the Perfect God idea too strongly

you end up with Docetism: Jesus could not be truly human, just an appearance of humanity. If you stress the humanity of Jesus too strongly you end up with an adopted or a subordinate Jesus, as various teachers, especially Arius, taught.

What I cling to is the statement from Paul, that ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself’, and the statement of Jesus, recorded by John, that ‘he who has seen Me has seen the Father’.

When I was 21 Jesus made Himself real to me through the reading of John’s Gospel, and I was called to follow Him. Since then the relationship has deepened, and – by Grace – I pray daily to be held close to the Lord who called me. Now I know only in part, imperfectly. I am willing to wait for perfect knowledge in the fullness of time.

John Everett (Summer 2020)