

Jesus, God and human: the richness of the Council of Chalcedon 451 CE

Sermon by Nigel Cooper at

The Chapel at Churchill College, 12 November 2023

Readings: Isaiah 45:22-24a; Philippians 2:5-11

Confession of Chalcedon

We, then, following the holy fathers, all with one consent teach everyone to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in humanhood;

truly God and truly human, of a rational soul and body;

coessential with the Father according to the Godhead, and coessential with us according to the

humanhood; 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 humanhood;

one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation;

the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ;

as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us.

[Creed of Chalcedon \(prca.org\)](https://www.prca.org/) - adapted

Christianity is an extraordinary religion: it actually claims that an historical person is also actually God. This is my riff as an amateur on the dogma. And my text for this sermon is:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

History

There is little doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was an historical person and, as such, also a normal person. To any bystander his crucifixion made that clear. There would have been no loincloth. Incontinence would have been obvious. Death secured.

But God? The first Christians were mostly Jews and so fiercely monotheist. And yet, within about twenty years of Jesus' death, Paul cites a well-accepted hymn to the

church in Philippi¹, presuming his hearers will be familiar with it. So it goes back to a date even closer to the death of Jesus. And yet, this hymn attributes to Jesus a passage from Isaiah, where it is attributed to God.² So-called Second Isaiah is the great monotheist of the Hebrew Bible. His repeated declaration is that there is only one God. “For I am God, and there is no other.” And in our passage, Isaiah makes God go on to say, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” Compare Paul, who writes, “At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, ... and every tongue shall swear...”³ – confess what? “That Jesus Christ is Lord.”! Isaiah went on to say, “Only in the Lord... are righteousness and strength.” It is extraordinary. Here Jesus and God are aligned. This is presumably on the basis of aspects of Jesus earthly life and experiences that are labelled ‘resurrection’.

This heart-felt worship of Jesus presents a challenge to the head. What are we to make of this oxymoron, the God-human? This is an ongoing journey of ‘Christology’ from the New Testament to today, and in this sermon I am making particular use of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. The early centuries of Christian theology are pivotal in our understanding of the person of Christ, this God-human.

The classical articulation of Christology was at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451. It partners the earlier articulation of the Trinity at Nicaea in 325.

The Confession of Chalcedon affirms that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly human, but it also affirms that Jesus Christ is a single, whole person. He is neither God and human mixed in a tertium quid. Nor is he split so some aspects belong to God and others to the human, all are shared. This is the *communication idiomatum*, the exchange of attributes.

It is about who Jesus is and not about how. It is not an explanation but a rule. A rule for reading scripture, for how to worship and to use in theological thinking. We must keep both natures before us. We are not to think of Jesus Christ as a half-god, as the Son of God language in the New Testament and elsewhere can tempt us to do. Arianism is easy to slip into.

What this reveals about God and humanity

The paradox of the God-human only seems oxymoronic if we retain long-held understandings of God and humanity. Christianity claims these understandings are mistaken because we have a revelation of the true nature of God and humanity in Jesus Christ. The difficulty in conception lies not in the compatibility of God and human, but in our concepts of these two natures.

We are familiar with the Christian assertion that Jesus reveals God. “If you have seen me you have seen the Father.” The God seen in Jesus is unlike the ‘god of the philosophers’, remote, almighty and unchanging. He is also unlike the god of our super-ego,

¹ Phil 2:5-11

² Isa 45:22-23

³ Phil 2:10-11, my rather pointed translation

judgemental and punitive. As Bishop David Jenkins used to say, “God is as he is in Jesus, so there is hope.”

The corollary is that Jesus reveals the true nature of humanity. Humans at their best share the same humanity as in Jesus. This challenges the assumption that people are essentially and necessarily selfish, prone to hate, violent, bent on power and also mortal and earth-bound. This understanding of humanity is unlike the human of the economist. And it is unlike our common experiences of others, and even of ourselves. We might say, “Humans are as they are in Jesus, so there is hope.”

In thinking about how the two natures are combined in one there are two parallel but opposite dynamics: the Godhead descending to the human and the human ascending to the divine. The descent can be thought of as *kenosis*, the emptying that Paul in Philippians spoke of. The ascent can be termed *theosis*, the Greek for the divinisation of the human.

Kenosis

This is the mind-bending, profound, glorious heart of the Incarnation. In humble love, God empties Godself, laying aside power and glory. Being born a human baby, dying on a cross, descending into hell. Christ shares our ignorance, temptation, privation, pain and fear. But there is more. The cry of dereliction, “My God, why have you abandoned me?” and the descent into the nothingness of death reveals the rupture within God. It is not just that Christ shares our death, but that he goes to the very boundary of existence and beyond, plumbing the full depth of alienation from the Father as the Father’s antithesis. God’s hiding in God in the dereliction of the cross and the silence of the grave is the definitive revelation of God. This is the Christian God.

This is no emergency measure after the Fall. Nor is it a brief, endurable episode (a ‘bad Friday afternoon’ before the weekend). It was planned before the foundation of the world. The Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, was in all eternity the *Logos incarnandus* (the gerundive): the Word due to be incarnate.

It is in the very nature of the Trinitarian relations that the Son offers himself to the Father in this way. The incarnation is the historical form of the Trinity’s essential self-emptying between the Three Persons. There is the total self-giving of the divine nature of the Father given to the Son and the Spirit. And there is the self-giving back of the divine nature of the Son to the Father in obedience and love.

(We might think of some animal mothers, who expend their while being and life to their offspring. With all the hesitancy of using any analogy, so the Persons give their existence to each other and, collectively, to the existence and life of creation. Similarly, somewhat like a mother rejoicing in her child and its love and care for her, perhaps in her old age, the Persons receive the divine nature back from each other in reciprocal love and gift.)

Now this God-as-human, this *Logos incarnatus*, the Word now incarnate, is not actually extraordinary as if God has joined some alien nature. No, humans, as revealed in Genesis, are a reflection of God the Word, are created in the image and likeness of God

(even if in practice this image is deformed through sin). They are patterned on the *Logos incarnatus*.

Theosis

And now, at incarnation, this created human in the image of God is conjoined with God and taken up into the divine life. This human is no longer a flawed image, darkened as in a mirror, but “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.”⁴ The resurrection and ascension of Jesus is the culmination, the consummation of creation. Humanity is taken up into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father, right into the life of the Holy Trinity.

Jesus Christ is not just an image, though, he is also both agent and recipient, the subject and object, of the work of God – of God’s creative, redemptive, consummating work. Jesus is both God and human, Son of God and Son of Man, the Word and Wisdom of God and the Second Adam. Karl Barth emphasised that Christ is both the elector and the elected, both the giver and the receiver of salvation.

Our participation in Christ

So, what about us? There is an important substitutionary dimension to the work of Christ, but this evening my focus is on the participatory dimension. “Behold, here am I and the children God gave me.”⁵

We share in the theosis of Christ. Our common humanity is divinised in him. And not just humanity, but the whole created order, which was assumed by Christ.

St Irenaeus: The Son of God became what we are so that we become God.

St Athanasius: The Son of God became human so we become God.

Christian thought is not individualist but corporate, cosmic even. Jesus Christ is the representative, incorporating head and leader. For instance the language of Son of Man and Second Adam. St Paul’s notable regular use of “in Christ”, is spelled out in Romans⁶, that dying and living with Christ we share in his death and resurrection. And Ephesians⁷ talks of God choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world and goes on⁸ to say that God’s plan for the fulness of time is to gather up all things in heaven and earth in Christ. Thus, in this way, we shall be like him⁹ and participate in the divine nature¹⁰.

There is a glorious sting in the tail. The divine nature that we are beginning to share in is one of kenosis, of self-giving, of emptying, of losing our lives for Christ’s sake. Thus, St

⁴ Heb 1:3

⁵ Heb 2:13

⁶ Rom 6:3-11

⁷ Eph 1:4

⁸ Eph 1:10

⁹ 1 Jn 3:2

¹⁰ 2 Ptr 1:4

Paul in our Philippians reading begins by writing that we should have the same mind as in Christ Jesus, humble and obedient to the point of death. That is the – somewhat uncomfortable! – glory of the divine nature that we are invited to share.