

Colloquium “Eén Heer, Jezus Christus” (2025)

Vrijdag 7 februari

‘Nicaea in its Time.’ The Evolution of the Language of the Creed

The Most Rev. Rowan Williams, Emeritus aartsbisschop van Canterbury

1.

Perhaps the simplest way to begin is by asking what the problem was to which the Creed of Nicaea was an answer. But as soon as we have said this, we are bound to recognize that – despite the obvious and immediate pressure of the crisis around the teachings of the Alexandrian presbyter, Arius – the text of the Creed in fact embodies an accumulation of answers to several distinct but related problems in early Christian debate. And it also represents a solution of sorts to another kind of problem, the question of how the Christian communities of the Roman world might resolve difficulties, especially in the unfamiliar context of an imperial regime that was taking a close interest in the affairs of the Church.

We shall return later to this second issue. But first, we need to spend some time on the sorts of tension within Christian teaching that lay behind the open conflicts between factions in the churches around the Mediterranean in the opening decades of the fourth century; and to do this, we have to ask about what was most obviously distinctive in the life and language of the communities that called themselves the ‘Catholic Church’ within and beyond the Roman imperial state, communities linked in a variety of formal and informal ways, sharing (by the beginning of the fourth century) both an institutional structure and a common memory of harassment and persecution by the imperial state. We know that two of the most important vehicles of connection between these communities were the exchanges of two kinds of report - about the election of leaders and about the effects of persecution. Christian communities made sure they continued to be recognizable to each other by confirming to one another who was officially agreed to be an authoritative teacher and administrator, and who had publicly suffered for their faith. The unity of the Church was very definitely the unity not of a single organization (and a number of significant local variations in organizational patterns persisted), but of a network of groups corresponding with one another, from

time to time receiving one another's leaders or teachers, consulting over problems that had become more than local, attempting to make sure that there was a reasonable parity of discipline, so that someone censured in one community could not simply transfer to another to escape sanction. It might indeed be better to speak not of a single 'network' but of an interlocking pattern of networks, like Venn diagrams, overlapping with one another in diverse ways bound up with geographical closeness, historic trading and cultural links, shared traditions and random personal connections.

But all of this of course presupposed recognizability in language and practice: a common understanding of baptism, for example, a common core of texts agreed to be accepted and authoritative (even if the exact boundaries of this common core could be a bit uncertain in some communities), and a loose summary of shared beliefs, described by various writers of the period as a 'rule' or 'standard' (*kanon*) of faith, or sometimes as a 'declaration on behalf of the Church' (*ecclesiastica praedicatio*), heavily influenced by the imperative of resisting what were thought of as 'Gnostic' views. Thus it was important that such 'rules' enjoined Catholic Christians to believe in *one* all-powerful God rather than the complex mythological cosmologies of some rival groups that accepted one or another variety of dualism, with different powers being responsible for the origin of different aspects of the universe. The conviction that there could not be more than one *arche*, one first principle, at the origin of the universe is axiomatic for the self-definition of what became the mainstream Christian communities. This is why the Creed of Nicaea begins with precisely this affirmation of a single divine agency from which the entire creation derives. Similarly, the affirmation of 'one Lord' declares unambiguously that the process of human redemption had a single focus in the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and, by implication, required no other heavenly agencies or intermediaries.

But it is the relation between these two affirmations of unity that poses the problem underlying the crisis of the early fourth century. So far as we can discern, the Christian communities were initially distinguished by claims to the direct experience of divine 'spirit', *pneuma*, conferred by the agency of Jesus. What the presence and action of this 'spirit' entailed is spoken of in very diverse ways. The evidence of Christian Scripture and some of the literature of the first century or so of Christian existence sets before us a spectrum of phenomena associated with the gift of spirit, from episodic ecstasy (prophecy, speaking in tongues, visionary insight) and powers of healing and exorcism to the cumulative work of building intense reciprocal relations within the community by the restraint of self-centred impulse and the spirit of competition. What holds together this range of phenomena

is the belief that the animating power of this spirit has the effect of making the believer share in some way in the experience of Jesus: like Jesus, the believer is able to employ certain unusual powers; like Jesus, the believer can understand their life as something to be renounced for the sake of the neighbour's or the community's well-being (an important element in thinking about martyrdom in those early communities). And, very significantly, like Jesus, the believer is set free to call God 'Father' and to live in the confidence that the 'kinship' with divine life that is thus created transforms what human nature is capable of, whether that is the performance of extraordinary and miraculous works or simply the selfless mutual service that constitutes the lifeblood of the community as the model of a humanity restore to its true nature.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the occasion or condition for the release of this spirit into the human world. In Christian Scripture we can see how this is linked by early Christian writers with Hebrew Scripture: Jesus is presented as the fulfilment of what is prophesied and anticipated in Hebrew Scripture, a fulfilment that is, among other things the extension of the covenant with Israel to the entire human family, a pouring-out of spirit upon 'all flesh'. And a Jesus who is able in this way to 'release' or bestow spirit and to extend the scope of the covenant made by God with Israel is manifestly a channel for nothing less than divine liberty and power; more than a prophet. His own uniquely full and unbroken possession by the divine spirit, his inhabiting by the spirit and of the spirit, manifests his authority; he can rightly be called 'Lord.' And Paul in his first letter to the community in Corinth states in plain terms that calling Jesus 'Lord' is one clear and primary effect of the presence of divine spirit in the believer. As Paul carefully works out in his letters, this implies that in the initiatory ceremony of baptism, the believer identifies with Jesus' acceptance of death for the sake of a new and shared life, and in that acceptance opens up to the gift of spirit, which realizes in them the fulness of the life of Jesus as it is now lived within the life and the glory of the eternal God.

From very early on, from barely twenty years after the crucifixion, Jesus is being spoken of in terms drawn from the Wisdom literature of Hebrew Scripture as the embodiment of divine wisdom – the power that holds the entire cosmos in harmony and mediates to creation the mind and purpose of God. Jesus is, like the Jewish Torah itself, the divine will and purpose enacted in human history. As eternal wisdom reflects without any flaw or divergence what it is to be God, so does Jesus within the world; Paul and other writers, including the anonymous writer 'to the Hebrews', see Jesus as the visible face of what 'emanates' from God eternally – a beneficent order that creates coherence

in the finite and contingent world, the power that turns things away from chaos. It remains a profoundly Jewish context of thought, when we look at the kind of speculative thinking about divine wisdom that was so widespread in the Jewish world of that era (not least in the philosophy of the Hellenized Jew, Philo of Alexandria); but it makes the new and controversial claim that this wisdom is uniquely embodied in Jesus.

But alongside this, another set of Jewish ideas and images is at work in the literature. The experience of 'spirit', as we've noted, involves – crucially – the freedom to address God as does Jesus, to pray as Jesus prays ('Our Father in heaven...'). The image, increasingly common and popular in Jewish speculation and apocalyptic, of a heavenly 'High Priest', a heavenly leader or co-ordinator of the prayer and praise of the angels, offering the sacrifice of praise at the heavenly altar of which the Temple in Jerusalem is an earthly symbol, is applied to Jesus by some Christian writers (conspicuously in the Letter to the Hebrews, less explicitly in other texts, including one or two passages of Paul and the Revelation to John). If Jesus' death is an atoning sacrifice, he is both priest and victim; if he lives in heaven to plead our cause, he is now forever exercising a priestly role; if he *addresses* God in this way, he is in some sense comparable to the heavenly beings in – for example – Isaiah's vision of the heavenly sanctuary, who sing praise to the enthroned Creator. Jewish literature of the Second Temple period and later frequently returns to this 'heavenly sanctuary' setting, sometimes identifying the heavenly High Priest with a figure from Scripture (Melchisedek, Moses, the archangel Michael), sometimes giving him the name of 'Metatron', the one next to the throne – both a leader of the angelic host and a deputy exercising aspects of divine power. And this model of the heavenly priest and 'viceroy' is evident in a number of Christian apocalyptic texts like the second-century Ascension of Isaiah, and surfaces again in some passages of Irenaeus and Origen; it is possible that the phraseology of at least one early eucharistic text also embodies a trace of this dramatic mythological theme.

The problem that arises is roughly this. If Jesus' gift of spirit is possible because he is the embodiment of divine wisdom, then the divinity at work in him is clearly inseparable from the life of the eternal and primary divine agent – the one that Jesus calls 'Father'. We do not need to suppose that there is actually an eternal second agent or subject in heaven. The unity of divine action in creation and redemption, that unity that we have noted as an essential element in the background of the credal text, is secured. But it is secured at the expense of weakening the significance of that aspect of the gift of divine spirit that confers on us a relation with God

continuous with Jesus' own relation to God, a relation of some kind of real kinship with the divine. The language of Christian prayer insistently points to the fact that the gift of spirit brings us into a pre-existing relation of intimacy with God through our identification with Jesus in baptism and eucharist. In which case, we *do* need to think of some pre-mundane plurality or differentiation in the divine life, a second 'agent' in heaven. For a Christian thinker wanting to stress the 'Word/wisdom/power' cluster of ideas, Jesus as embodying the outward-streaming life of the creator imparting order and beauty to the universe, the language of a 'plurality' in heaven leans dangerously towards compromising the single *arche* from which all things derive. But for someone beginning from the liturgical and devotional language of Jesus as High Priest of the heavenly temple, this suspicion or repudiation of heavenly plurality reduced the promise of transformation, what was already being called *theosis*, 'divinization', from very early on. The radically transfiguring effect of standing with Jesus in prayer, within the Holy of Holies in heaven, experiencing the gift of divine love and intimacy, our lives grounded and embraced in divine life as is Jesus' life – all this is watered down if there is no eternal personified Wisdom standing in the presence of the eternal Father.

This is the awkwardly unfinished business of much of the theology of the first two hundred and fifty years of Christian theology; and this is essentially, I think, the problem that Nicaea was trying to resolve. As we shall see, it did so more by providing an agenda for further work than by producing all at once a comprehensive answer; but – as so often in the history of doctrine – what mattered most was to be sure of what kinds of discourse had to be ruled out. What must we *not* say? With this in mind, we'll turn to the details of the crisis that flared up in the first decades of the fourth century, and the attempts of both Arius and his bishop to clarify the vocabulary of doctrine.

2.

Second and third century theological reflection had become increasingly conscious (especially in the context of debates with Gnostic groups) of the need to defend the coherence of Christian belief in ways that took seriously the standards of philosophical discourse. This was not – as it has sometimes been represented – a capitulation to alien 'Greek' models of rationality; it was a recognition of the fact that the biblical commitment to the absolute freedom and the absolute faithfulness of the creator needed to be linked with the metaphysical grammar of transcendence: the divine could not be subject to change (could not be at the mercy of circumstances), could not be an object among other objects, could not be subject to time or confined in space. As Origen famously makes clear at

the very beginning of his systematic treatise *On First Principles*, when we follow scripture in calling God 'spirit', we do not mean (as some philosophical systems would have meant) a very refined version of material substance infinitely extended, but a life beyond any kind of contingency or conditioning.

But this intensified the theological tensions already at work. If talking intelligibly and coherently about the divine life involved affirming an unchangeable mode of existence, free from passivity and vulnerability, unconditioned and unconfined, beyond the level at which it might make sense to look for a definition to distinguish divine life from other kinds of life, as if they shared the same 'space', then there was a *prima facie* difficulty about the kind of unity that might exist between God and the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was clearly subject to change and vulnerability, and is reported in some texts as having a developing and thus imperfect human knowledge; denying this was one of the errors associated with some varieties of gnostic teaching, and it had become a significant element in making sense of the suffering of Christian martyrs. Building on hints in Christian Scripture, theologians and chroniclers saw their suffering as united with Christ's: Christ 'suffered' in and with them, uniting their death with his as part of the peacemaking or atoning sacrifice offered to God in his death (it is why some martyrological texts and narratives use eucharistic imagery to describe the suffering and death of Christians under persecution).

The dilemma this produced was that, if Jesus suffered and changed, it was none too clear what was meant by claiming that he 'embodied' eternal divine Wisdom. Was he in fact the recipient of a divine gift from outside himself, like the prophets of old, only more so? And if that were the case, was there any need to suppose a second 'god' in heaven, an eternal subject or agent? But in that case, was there in fact anything radically new about the gift given in and through Jesus? What exactly did it mean to think of him as having the authority to release or bestow divine spirit, if he himself had received it from the creator? What was more, how did this relate to the threefold formula of baptism and the regular invocation of Jesus as Lord, as the appropriate object of worship?

Part of the genius of Origen, the finest Christian intellect of the era before Nicaea, was that he recognized the difficulty and addressed it by way of an impressively original and sophisticated theory. All human beings, in Origen's scheme, had once been pure spiritual intelligences contemplating the eternal glory of God in union with God's eternal Logos – an eternal agent, deriving all his nature and activity directly from God and completely occupied in the loving

contemplation of the Father, uniting and grounding all lesser agencies in the universe within that eternal action. But those spiritual intelligences fell way from their contemplative purity, and were clothed with soul and body – with an instinctual life and a material shape – so that they might, by exercising their spiritual intelligence in overcoming the temptations and limitations of life in the world, restore the strength and integrity they had lost. But one such intelligence never fell away, remaining in perfect unity with the Logos. Although it had no need of becoming embodied, it did so, by God’s providence, so as to unite other created spirits with itself and enable their full victory over the trials and constraints of life in the material world by the gift of the divine spirit to them, a gift presumably enabled by its inseparable adherence to the unchanging Logos. This scheme allowed for a genuinely personal Logos as paradigm and foundation for the contemplation of the source of divinity, but also for an embodiment not precisely of the Logos as such but of something that, when embodied, brought the Logos with it. Once embodied, its soul and flesh endured the change and frailty that attends life in the world, but the spiritual intelligence at the core of this human identity retained its unity with the divine. And while the eternal Logos was always flowing forth from the Father and turning back to the Father in love and contemplation, the spiritual intelligences, though without temporal beginning, like the rest of creation, existed because of a deliberate divine determination. The Logos was thus neither an impersonal aspect of divine life nor a being among other created beings; derived from the Father, and so in some sense less than the Father, he/it was nonetheless the perfect image of the Father, existing in complete continuity with the Father.

This ingenious model was supported by detailed exegesis of biblical passages, especially from Hebrew Scripture, designed to argue against any depersonalizing of the Logos but also against any separation between the act, will, life of the Logos and that of the Father. It proved controversial – predictably perhaps; but it succeeded in holding together both of the concerns we have outlined as arising at the origins of Christian theology. Origen is able to deploy some elements both of the ‘heavenly sanctuary’ tradition and of the embodied wisdom vocabulary; but some clearly found his language insufficiently clear about the eternal independence of the Logos (partly because of his use of the language of ‘emanation’ or outflowing, *aporroia*), while others challenged his exegetical arguments for an independent eternal Logos. The traces of these debates can be followed in the sparse and sometimes garbled fragments that survive from the controversies triggered by Bishop Paul of Samosata in the third quarter of the third century, and from the ‘Defence of Origen’ by Pamphilus against accusations made early in the fourth century.

One detail that emerges from this is the likelihood that Origen at least mentioned a specific bit of terminology that was to feature prominently in the coming controversies. The word *homoousios*, ‘of the same substance’, seems to have been used by Origen in commenting on a biblical text from the Letter to the Hebrews (itself adapting a passage from the deuterion-canonical Book of Wisdom). Christ as divine Wisdom is an *aporroia* from God, and (according to a text quoted by Pamphilus as translated and heavily revised by Rufinus nearly a century later) Origen notes that an emanation or overflow is ‘of one substance’ with what it comes from. As with so much material from this period, our evidence is sparse and dependent on quotations from later writers who often have an agenda unconnected with the material they claim to be quoting. But the likelihood is that this relates in some way to the decisions of the council that condemned Paul of Samosata. He had been charged with teaching that the Logos was ‘of one substance’ with the Father, in the sense that there was no separation between Logos and Father and that the Logos was simply an aspect of the one divine life rather than a person. It’s pretty clear that this was not at all what Origen himself believed; but it is certainly possible that he used the term to underline the belief that, despite the personal difference between Father and Logos, the life or nature of the Logos was not different in kind from that of the Father – i.e. was not that of a rival deity or of a member of the created order. Whatever the truth in this context, it is clear that, somewhere around the middle of the second decade of the fourth century, Bishop Alexander of Alexandria had recommended this vocabulary to his clergy so as to reinforce the absolute continuity of the life of the Word embodied in Jesus with the life of God as creator and source of all. This seems to have been the trigger for Arius, a senior and respected cleric in Alexandria, to declare his principled opposition to this usage, and to state his own position – that is, to offer his own resolution to the tension that had become so much more visible because of the debates around Origen and Paul of Samosata.

He did so with a schema that provides a careful and sophisticated alternative to Origen. Once again, we have to work with caution, as the evidence we have is fragmentary and often biased, but some sort of coherent picture emerges. Arius’s arguments seem to presuppose that there are several different senses of *homoousios*, all of them unacceptable from a theological point of view; and that the obvious conclusion had to be that the Logos was of a different ‘substance’ from the eternal Father. We can glean from contemporary philosophical literature what *homoousios* could mean. It might refer to one portion of a divisible substance: a sliver of soap is of one substance with the original bar of soap. It might mean a member of the same natural kind: this table is of one substance with that table, this cat with that cat, this human being with that. Or it might mean an abstract

aspect of something, an aspect that is part of the definition of some substance: 'being a biped' is part of the definition of 'being human', an inseparable part of human 'substance'. The first meaning is inadmissible because the divine life is immaterial and so cannot be divided. The second is inadmissible because it suggests two members of a genus of divine beings (back to the familiar problem of 'two first principles'). The third is inadmissible because it denies that the Logos is an actual agent or subject.

The implication is that the Logos is a distinct being created by God: he is called 'Logos' by analogy with the eternal divine wisdom that is indeed part of God's nature or definition, but is not identical with that eternal wisdom. He is 'divine' by analogy, receiving from God all that a creature could possibly receive. But as a creature he is still subject, as God is not, to change and to suffering; there is no impossibility in his becoming embodied and exposed to the changes and chances of the world we know. Yet he is also the means by which the invisible and unimaginable God becomes known. He praises the eternal God who is his maker and (metaphorically) his 'parent', and he leads the praises of creation; he conducts us into the heavenly sanctuary where we see and know what is possible for us to see and know as creatures – which will always be less than the Logos, although the Logos cannot know the whole mystery of divine life any more than we can. The Logos is (like the pre-existent spirit of Jesus in Origen's system) theoretically capable of change, perhaps even of turning away from God's will (though it is not clear if Arius ever directly claimed this), but in practice is unfailingly faithful. Like Origen's system once again, this model combines aspects of both the approaches to the presence of the divine in Jesus that we outlined earlier, the wisdom tradition and the , and liturgical prayer, and as a pattern that made good sense in the context of the developing metaphysical systems of the period.

3.

The difficulty was that it was also a pattern that satisfied neither tradition. For those leaning towards the 'wisdom/Logos' vocabulary, its sharp distinction between a divine and impersonal divine Logos and a created and theoretically changeable heavenly being that could be called 'Logos' only by analogy weakened the claim that what was embodied in Jesus was an active divine subject, a *hupostasis* in the language that was already being more widely used. For those more influenced by the liturgical mythology of the heavenly sanctuary, it weakened the claim that the heavenly High Priest had authority to confer on believers a relation with the divine source, the Father, enjoyed by

the priestly mediator from all eternity, not given as a divinely-willed act of grace to a non-divine subject.

Common to both kinds of discontent with Arius's scheme was an unhappiness about the clarity with which Arius embraced the idea of a *created* mediator. This implied that the divine life could exist independently of the existence of a personified Logos. It was all very well to say that of course God was eternally possessed of a *logikos* capacity and could never be *alogos*, without mind or communicative power. But this seemed to say less than the scriptural texts declared. Initially Arius won some support from those who shared his anxieties about a model that left nothing between a single divine person and a created human mediator, concerns that were (rightly or wrongly; we have little fully reliable evidence) focused on the legacy of Paul of Samosata. The homoousion was widely understood as implying something of this kind, an absorption of the Logos into the undivided divine life of the Father. But the story of what happened after Nicaea, and the history of the controversies of the half-century that followed, strongly suggest that the distinctive detail of Arius's theology was rapidly disowned, and his own memory tactfully sidelined or discarded; the heart of the fourth century controversy was to do with whether the Nicene homoousion and its defenders could do justice to the idea of an eternally distinct subsistence for the divine Son. It proved to be the great achievement of Athanasius's theology and diplomacy (and sheer stubbornness) to persuade a significant percentage of the sceptical Christian intelligentsia of the Eastern Mediterranean that nothing short of the Nicene formula would guard against what they feared most, the reduction of the Logos to an impersonal divine power.

And so a word - *homoousios* – which appears originally to have been chosen simply as a way of underlining the complete continuity of the Logos's action with that of the Father (in connection with the 'emanation'/*aporrhia* set of metaphors) became the touchstone of a theology in which the unity of divine action was affirmed alongside the plurality of divine *agents*: a resolution to which Athanasius's *contra Arianos* made a decisive contribution but which was then refined and extended by the Cappadocians and others. As is often observed, the word *ousia* in the period before the mid fourth century had all the ambiguity that had characterized its use since Aristotle, an ambiguity that persists with the word 'substance' in English); it could designate both a shared kind, an 'essence', and a distinct subsistent or subject. The clear differentiation of its meaning so as to make it designate the life that is common to Father, Son and Spirit was the major contribution of the Cappadocians. And the acknowledged risk of implying the existence of three individuals sharing a

single essence (which would sound uncomfortably like multiplying first principles again) was averted by the Cappadocian insistence that the divine subsistents, hypostases, were distinguished only by their relation to one another – that is, they were not instances of a shared kind distinguished by contingent features of their existence.

But the detail of that is another and more complex story. For our present purposes, the point is that the Creed of Nicaea decisively blocked any notion of the Logos (or, as was rapidly clarified, the Spirit) being created by divine will, like the finite universe. The eternal Son was ‘begotten, not made’, begotten ‘out of the substance of the Father’ (that is, as the anathemas of the Creed implied, not ‘out of nothing’ (like creation) nor out of any pre-existing reality alongside the divine Father (thus affirming the single *arche* of all things); the statement that the Son was ‘of the same substance’ as the Father simply summed up these key points. There was nothing that could ‘constitute’ the Logos, nothing out of which the Logos could ‘take shape’, except the eternal and unchanging life or nature of the Father. As the awkward grammar of the first chapter of John’s gospel had expressed it, *theos en ho logos*: ‘what the Logos was was God’, or ‘the answer to the question of what sort of life the Logos has is God’s life.’

Put in slightly different terms, what the Creed of Nicaea in effect says is that it is impossible adequately to speak about God without specifying that the word includes reference to the Logos as generated in and by the divine life and existing as ‘Son’ within the divine life – i.e. as a distinct centre of agency and a term within a relation. This latter turn of phrase seems to have been one of the things that Arius objected to in the theology he was criticizing, and its use goes back to Origen: if God is truly Father, and if God’s definition cannot change, the correlative term to ‘Father’ (‘Son’, ‘offspring’) must be an eternal reality. Origen also applied this, much more controversially, to God’s relation to creation, and, if Arius objected to this as making creation necessary to God, he may well have extended his suspicion to the argument about the reciprocal implication of ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ language. His own scheme explicitly rules out this sort of appeal to the logical symmetry of ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ as proving the unequivocal divinity of the Logos. But the Creed – while leaving radically unfinished a range of terminological and metaphysical issues – firmly rules out any language about God that makes no allowance for relation within the divine unity. It is why, from Gregory Nazianzen to Pseudo-Dionysius and ultimately to Aquinas, there is a consistent denial that the unity of God is an ‘arithmetical’ matter. ‘There is one God’ is saying not that there happens to be only one instance

of divinity but that there is not and cannot be any division of divine life – even when we recognize the complementary and interdependent diversity of divine agency.

While this reinforces the ‘single first principle’ argument, it both allows for a residual hierarchy within the divine – the *monarchia* of the Father as argued for by the Cappadocians – and makes somewhat problematic any idea of a numerically single source of this kind by refusing to identify the singleness of the first principle with a single centre of agency. The tensions set up in this context have continued to affect the different emphases of Eastern and Western trinitarian theologies, but it is important not to overstate these differences. Even in the Cappadocian, there is no hint that the divine Source or Father somehow subsists independently of his generative action, so that there is a personal hypostatic individual existing ‘prior to’ the trinitarian life. The focus of the Nicene formulae is simply to clarify the non-created status of the Logos; but this is done by reimagining what divine unity must mean. And because of this, the homoousion makes it possible to hold on to the central concerns of both the perspectives we have been thinking about. On the one hand: what is active in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is nothing less than the life of the creator (a point underlined by Athanasius: only the creator can re-create), the divine wisdom that sustains all things. But on the other: that active divine life is one that is turned towards the eternal Source, as ‘Son’ as well as Word, and the relation of filial intimacy with that Source into which Jesus and the Spirit of Jesus induct the believer is radically different from the relation of creature to creator. Jesus as Word incarnate is indeed the channel by which we are united with God and through whom our relation with God is mediated; but the relation into which we are drawn is an eternal fact about the divine life, not simply a gift given by the creator to creation and existing only because creation exists. If there is one issue at the centre of what Nicaea is doing and what problem it is resolving, it is this question of the reality of the filial relation of Christ and the Father as an unchanging fact about the divine life or nature.

4.

This matters for many reasons, not least – as the fourth century theologians repeat so often – that only such a model can make sense of the claim of ‘deification’ as the goal of the incarnate life. We do not imitate Christ’s behaviour so as to gain Christ’s reward. We do not share with Christ a gift given him ‘from outside’ by God. We participate in an uncreated flow and rhythm of divine life, from the generated to the one generating (how all this relates to the theology of the Spirit is a matter I

shall come back to in my second lecture). Thus the fundamental intuition of liturgical language and practice in the 'heavenly sanctuary' tradition is vindicated in the most comprehensive and conceptually adventurous way. But there is one other feature of the Nicene resolution that bears a little more directly on the practical life of the Church.

Nicaea was an unprecedented event in that it was the first time that the imperial authority had demanded of the Church that it resolve a doctrinal debate. It was clear to the Emperor Constantine that he was entitled as *basileus* to require this; and although his intervention in the outcome was not as decisive and specific as that of some of his successors, it seems to have been clear to him also that he had the right – as the recipient of particular divine gifts and graces – to steer the Church towards a true answer to the question it was seeking to deal with. The rationale for this was of course famously spelled out by Eusebius of Caesarea in his 335 oration addressed to Constantine: the Logos 'deputizes' for the First God in the cosmos, the Emperor 'deputizes' for the Logos in the governance of the human world.

But the Nicene schema (with which Eusebius himself was so unhappy) was bound to unsettle any such notion. If the Logos is consubstantial with the Father, he is never acting in the place of a distant or absent God: he is (among other things) the 'form' of the Father's action within creation. And this in turn implies that the Emperor is not standing in for an absent or distant Logos. The Church on earth needs no human mediator to establish it as the community of those called to deifying union with the eternal Son. Any derived 'divinity' in the imperial office is fundamentally relativized by the universally offered union with the glorified Christ in the Spirit. And, as has often been argued, this undermines any simple notion of the Church's subordination to the Emperor in matters touching its life *as Church*. It makes sense of Athanasius's resistance to Constantine and Constantine's son Constantius, and similar acts of defiance towards imperial authority – and the fact that such defiance could be shown both by pro- and anti-Nicene leaders says something about how the Eusebian model had failed to prevail.

One way of reading the long-term outcome of Nicaea is to see it as providing some of the most important resources for counterbalancing the pressures to turn the Church into a state cult; so much of the 'Constantinian effect' is directed to that goal, and the Church can hardly be said to have been immune from it. But at this particular moment, without either Church or Emperor quite noticing it, Christian language settled its grammar about the divine trinity in such a way that an ontology of

'delegated power' descending from a First God to creation by a series of intermediaries was rendered inadmissible. With very variable consistency, yet nonetheless without ever finally surrendering to 'imperial' pressure across the centuries, the Church retained the claim to decide its own language and its own boundaries, rather than allow them to be established by state authority, even by a professedly and systematically Christian state authority.

This is one area where the significance of Nicaea in its day opens out on to our second question of the Creed's pertinence to current concerns, intellectual, spiritual and social; and to this we shall be turning in the second of these reflections.