

# Colloquium “Eén Heer, Jezus Christus” (2025)

Vrijdag 7 februari

## Nicaea in our Time.’ The Relevance of the Language of the Creed

The Most Rev. Rowan Williams, Emeritus aartsbisschop van Canterbury

1.

In what has been said so far about how the language of the Creed of Nicaea took shape, two dominant themes emerge. One is the insistence that the relation existing between the divine life as lived in Jesus and the life of the Source of all things, called ‘Abba’ by Jesus, is not itself a created or timebound reality; it belongs to the realm of what is eternally and intrinsically true of God as revealed to us. It is not quite right to say that it belongs to the ‘essence’ of God; there is still a distinction to be drawn between what we have to say to be speaking about divine life as such or in general and what we have to say to be speaking about that life as specifically shown to us in its concrete activity. Someone who didn’t believe in the trinity – whether a Jewish patriarch or prophet or a mediaeval Muslim philosopher – would certainly be able to identify the true God over against idols; they would know that to speak about God meant denying certain limitations or external constraints, distinguishing divine life from any life that was lived within the interdependent universe we inhabit. And classical Christian thinking has generally been at ease with this recognition of a ‘grammar’ for the divine that is to some extent shared with non-Christians.

But Christian theology is not only about how we speak of God in a way that avoids idolatry and crude anthropomorphism. It is about the *act* by which we have been brought into the full vision and enjoyment of divine goodness. And in this context, the affirmation of eternal relatedness is indeed a necessary element in truthful speaking about God. Just as a Jew would say that speaking truly about God – speaking about God so that God might be rightly identified and characterized – would sooner or later have to involve speaking of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the God who establishes law and covenant with Israel, so the Christian knows that speaking of God truthfully will sooner or later involve speaking of ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ And indeed, just as speculative Jewish thought of a certain tradition claims that Torah (and thus by implication

the covenant with Israel) pre-exists eternally in the divine life, so the Christian claims in respect of the life of the divine Word and Offspring. What makes these Jewish and Christian claims something other than plain rivals, by the way, is a very significant issue, but not one to address at full length here. Enough for now to say that, for the Christian, the whole idea of learning to identify God in the light of covenanted relationship is unthinkable without the heritage of Jewish reflection and experience. The new thing in Christian language is the insistence that this unbreakable relatedness is grounded in an eternal giving and receiving within the divine life itself.

And so to the second theme that emerges. Nicaea makes plain that the unity of God's life is not the unity of an individual; and Nicaea's defenders, from Athanasius onwards, clarify this further by exploring what it means to think of divine unity as a unity of action, carefully avoiding both the idea that it is a unity of 'stuff' (God is immaterial and so indivisible) and the assumption that it is a unity of what we should now think of as individual subjectivity, an ultimately single divine person. The actual 'exercise' of divine life, the fact of God-living-the-divine-life, as we might put it, is indivisible, in the simple sense that nothing, no external agency, no unique local variation between individuals, can affect or qualify that unity; but it simply is what it is *as* a self-differentiating act. There is no primitive numerical unity, no individual singleness, that is then extended into differentiation. We may speak of the *monarchia* of the Father, in Cappadocian style – the argument that God the Father is the sole Source of divine life – but this cannot mean that there is any conceivable sense in which the Father could coherently be thought of independently of the Son and the Spirit. Thus the trinitarian life is not one in which either a supreme and all-powerful individual decides to generate a second agent, or one in which three distinct individuals enter into a union. The distinctive nature of *this* unity is eternal and equal interdependence, an inseparable pattern of mutual definition. This mutual involvement is not a declining away from or loss of some imagined 'absolute' unity, an ultimate numerical oneness. Indeed, for the mainstream of Christian theological thinking, to look for such an absolute numerical oneness would be another kind of idolatry, projecting on to the divine the characteristics of finite reality – as if the one unconditioned life of God had to be ultimately a version of the kind of individuality we recognize in finite substances, which is always a unity delimited by what it is not. It is with this in mind that the tradition of 'negative theology' going back to Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century denies that either oneness or threeness 'as we commonly use the terms' (*he pros hemon*) applies to divine life.

This means that the threefold life of God cannot be appealed to as some sort of model either for hierarchy (a perfect instance of will and obedience) or for egalitarian community (a perfect instance of collaboration), although there have been those who have argued – and do argue – in this way. It does, however, have a bearing for those who have argued for the idea of a ‘trinitarian ontology’ – that is, for a metaphysical perspective that sees interdependence as fundamental to reality overall and is sceptical of any attempt to postulate a ‘basic’ order of reality consisting of autonomous centres of agency, to which all higher-level patterns of activity or energy can be reduced. And it is important that the *homoousion* and the associated phrases in the Creed about the eternity of the Son’s generation decisively resist any idea of a single primordial *will* as the source of all plurality. Creation is definitely not a simple emanation from the divine life, but neither is it comparable to an individual deciding something in a vacuum beyond all relatedness. What is ontologically basic is not the exercise of an unconstrained ‘power to determine’, but the innate interwovenness of an indivisible process without beginning. At the very least, this encourages us to interrogate sharply any theological or metaphysical model in which the prevailing language for creation is simply one of arbitrary and unconstrained agency on the part of – effectively – a supramundane individual making a decision. As the theology of Athanasius regularly suggests, we need to see it more as an unforced but consistent effect of the fact that God is the sort of God that God is (and that God’s unity is the sort of unity that it is). The Nicene understanding of the Trinity becomes a factor in ‘demythologizing’ the doctrine of creation

2.

The language of the original Creed of Nicaea depicts the generation of the Logos in terms of derivation from the *ousia* that is the Father’s, *ek tes tou patros ousias*; the revision of the Creed in 381 dropped the phrase, presumably because of the growing need to clarify the distinction between *ousia* and *hupostasis*, but its original use is revealing. The Creed (with its anathemas) is determined to avoid any hint that the Logos derives from anything except the life of the Father – and this involves a denial that the Logos derives from the *will* of the Father if that will is understood as in any way different from the *nature* of the Father. There are two related mistakes we can make in reading the Creed’s phraseology here. It is possible to end up effectively identifying the Father with the divine essence; originally there is simply ‘God’, a single divine person identical with divine nature, who elects to have company. Or, if we want to make slightly better sense of this, we might be tempted to think of the divine essence as something conceptually separate from the person of

the Father, something that can be handed from one 'possessor' of it to another. If we want to avoid such errors, we have to think more carefully about this vocabulary of derivation from 'the Father's essence'. It carries at least some implication that, if the Son receives from the Father a divine life that is entirely shaped by the life that the Father lives, we are bound to be aware that the Father's life is by definition characterized by 'generating', self-bestowing or self-sharing. 'What it is like to be the Father' is to be divine life in the mode of origination and outpouring; and so what the Son timelessly receives is a divinity likewise *characterized by the 'generating'* of differentiated divine life. The relation of begetter and begotten is, as many were to insist in the fourth century and afterwards, an asymmetrical one (the Son does not beget the Father). But that does not mean that the Son does not receive a life that is in turn 'productive' of divine life in another eternal and distinct mode, another subsistent agency. While the theological language of the fourth century and afterwards is clear that the Son is not the Spirit's 'parent', which would just be to repeat the logically prior relation of begetter and begotten at another level and so to locate the Spirit at a remove from the Father, this theology also insists that the Father, in generating the Son, at the same 'moment' releases or realizes a further dimension of divine life: begetting the Son does not exhaust the generative life that is God's.

Nicenes and anti-Nicenes both in various contexts use the language of the Son as 'perfect image' of the Father – though, in the immediate aftermath of Nicaea, pro-Nicene writers are more reserved about it, since it was used to resist a homoousian theology. It is a way of speaking that implies that the Son's life reflects the Father's action, or the Father's nature *as* active, and so it can be taken to imply that the Son's life, like the Father's, is *generative*; and, like the Father's, it cannot be thought of as generating anything less than a divine life – and so, in turn, generating a life that generates. What happens in the generating of the Son is the realizing of more than the life of the Son alone; the Son receives from the Father that dimension of divine life that is the sheer gift of bringing into life what is other. So as the Son is generated, this gift of bringing (divine) life becomes identifiable in its own right, something that is neither Father nor Son yet is presupposed in their eternal relation, and guarantees that their relation is not simply a neat and closed mutual definition.

The Creed of Nicaea is notoriously reticent about the Holy Spirit, a deficiency only partly remedied by the modest expansion of the text at Constantinople in 381. But it is not accidental that the first description of the Spirit in the 381 text is 'Lord and lifegiver' or 'lifemaker' (*zoopoion*). As the Gospel of John puts it, the Father gives the Son the gift of 'having life in himself' (Jn 5.26), a life that we

have already been told (1.4) is 'the light of humankind'. And the overall witness of Christian Scripture identifies that life as the energy of the Spirit as it creates in human selves the likeness of Jesus' relation to the Father, bringing alive in the finite world the infinite pattern of threefold life from which the world derives. As the fourth century controversies unfolded, it became clearer that it was essential to avoid any suggestion that this gift of the living Spirit, active in and given by Jesus, could be a part of creation, a power or energy brought into being by divine will rather than a dimension of divine nature or life; and so the *homoousion* of the Spirit was increasingly explicitly affirmed by theologians. And although the 381 credal text does not use this term, by declaring that the Spirit is *worshipped* alongside the Father and Son, it declares that the divine life that is the unchanging and unconditioned focus of our adoration and the source of our healing is inseparably Source and Offspring *and* the power of generating and regenerating this reciprocal and fruitful relation, in time and in eternity. The Son 'realizes' the Spirit; the Spirit is what is given by the Father in generating the Son; as 'proceeding through' the Son, the Spirit manifests what eternally exists in relation to the Father's distinctive life that makes possible the Son's generation but is never exhausted in that dimension of divine activity.

As is obvious, such a level of abstraction is pushing at the edges of what is conceivable and sayable. At every stage of the doctrinal debate in the fourth century, what shaped the conclusions of conciliar and catechetical language was not an attempt to create a satisfactory speculative scheme, but to state what the practice and speech of the Church, especially in its liturgy, was taking for granted. The Logos recreates in the world the possibilities of created life in communion with God, and so cannot be less than the creator; the Spirit creates the finite likeness of the eternal Son's union with the Father and so cannot be less than the creator. The action of the Son or Word in the restoration of the fallen world involves the creation of a relation with the Father somehow continuous with that of the eternal Word to the Father, and so the Word cannot be simply an impersonal feature of divine life. The Spirit's action in realizing this possibility implies that this action is both continuous with that of Father and Son but not reducible to it. And thus the pattern of inseparable unity in interdependence is 'framed': the territory within which we can speak coherently of the God of Scripture is outlined, but the filling-in of that outline remains in every generation an agenda for thought rather than a finished theory. What abides through the ages is not a theory but the reality of the Church's life; when this latter weakens in its sense of newness and distinctiveness, so does theological reflection.

And the pursuit of this reflection is not for the sake of some simply intellectual satisfaction: a persuasive theoretical account of the trinitarian life is not of itself a worthwhile undertaking. It is significant only insofar as it works to avoid idolatry with regard to God and injustice in regard to humanity and the finite world. As we have seen, the trinitarian vision constantly protests against a view of God as abstract sovereign will, or as some kind of extraterrestrial force making its way against our own integrity and flourishing. It is a vision of indivisible dependence *on* what is other and gift-giving *to* what is other as the foundation of anything that can be called real. A God who is conceived simply as a rival identity to the world is easily imagined as an enemy. Both Jewish and Islamic monotheism have their own ways of guarding against this: Judaism insists on the eternal promise of the covenant, Islam identifies the primary confessional designation of God as ‘the Merciful and Compassionate’. Both, in other words, find ways of conceiving God’s transcendent unity and freedom as always directed towards the well-being of what is made. But the Christian formulation is the most ambitious and controversial, introducing into the very idea of divine unity the pattern of mutual dependence, giving and receiving, with the existence of the created world as a mirror of this divine pattern – the world existing because of God’s unconstrained gift and finding its own fulfilment in the joy of immersion in divine life, both in contemplation and in the action of lifegiving service in and to the world.

The idolatry of a certain kind of crude and mythical monotheism has done much to make Christian faith suspect in the eyes of those struggling for different kinds of human emancipation; and it is not as though the Nicene confession of faith has always preserved the Church from such idolatry. But it should also be clear that false understandings of God produce false understandings of the human. The non-Nicene God, conceived as pure individual will, is – so to speak – the creator of the distorted vision of humanity that encourages us to replace a dominant and all-powerful individual in heaven with a dominant and all-powerful individual on earth – the autonomous and self-defining ego of so much of modernity, or the collective version of this, the rhetoric of an all-powerful and monochrome human culture, whose needs can be met by technological advance, unlimited material production and expansion, and environmental exploitation. But the problem arising for our sense of the human if we do not factor into our thinking the insights of Nicene theology is not only that of a reactive triumphalism about an isolated humanity or a solitary individual. It is also the risk of underestimating the human, losing the awareness of what it means to say that we are made in the image of God. It is possible to end up with a view of the human that is so bound up with the pressures of success or mastery that we lose sight of the human dignity of those who are left behind

in competitive struggle, social or economic, those who are systematically deprived of liberty by indifferent global economic systems or localized inequality or discrimination, those living with acute physical or mental challenges that make it harder for them to achieve the kind of security that is possible for the privileged. Christian theology assumes the same valuation of human beings as Jewish Scripture accords them in the opening chapter of Genesis, as being made in the divine 'image and likeness'.

But the Nicene perspective adds something important. The God in whose image we are made is now understood as a God in whose life communion and mutuality are eternally at work; a God whose life involves an eternal relation of filial intimacy. Human beings are made specifically – so Christian Scripture argues – in the image of this filial intimacy; we are created so as to be children of God, so as to be free to approach God as adopted daughters and sons, sharing Jesus' relation to the Source of all. In other words, the specific dignity belonging to all human beings is a dignity derived from and analogous to that of the divine Son. We are made to receive the gift of intimate union and the gift of generative freedom, the gift of lifegiving. It is not only that reverence is owed to human subjects without exception but that human subjects without exception are endowed with a 'godlike' capacity to be involved in the creation of the lives of others. The Spirit released in the incarnation and the events of Jesus' death and resurrection is able to be at work in each person in such a way that they are free to 'release' the Spirit's lifegiving creativity in one another.

It is this startlingly ambitious and radical vision of the human that follows from the full recognition of the divinity of Word and Spirit, from the theology that Nicaea establishes as the direction of trinitarian language. Our human 'place' is the place 'next to the Father's heart' that is spoken of in (once again) the first chapter of John's Gospel (1.18); to believe in the divine glory of the Word is to believe that humanity draws its promise and beauty from reflecting that proximity to the Father in love and in authoritative liberty. Humanity's 'place' is where the Word eternally is. A theological anthropology that does not in this way locate humanity 'within' the divine prototype of responsive love and creativity does less than justice to God and humanity alike; the divine image is in greater danger of being reduced to the distorted version mentioned already – the image of an unconstrained individual will, the projection onto the life of heaven of the fallen and damaged self that is so invested in idolatrous fantasy. That false image in turn reinforces the dangerous idea that human dignity is tied to success in mastering an otherwise alien creation and bending it to the triumphant will that is the most important element of 'divine', unchallengeable control in this

perspective. But the Nicene echo of John's Gospel that declares *all things* to have been made in and by the Logos locates humanity not only next to the Father's heart but within the universal life that the Word bestows on every finite thing. We are not created alone, or in opposition to, or in tension with the rest of the created order. We glorify our creator by giving life to and receiving life from our entire world. And the blurring or obscuring of the image by human rebellion and selfishness is especially starkly visible in the schism created between humanity and its world, oblivious of the fact that violence against the world is a violence against the self (as Pope Francis's *Laudato si* argues so lucidly).

3.

A theology 'educated' by the Nicene formulations is thus one that makes clear claims about humanity as well as God; and the expansion of the Creed in 381 is in one way a spelling out of this. To believe in the Source and the Word and the Spirit as equally and substantially God is the foundation for believing in a continuity of differentiated divine action through the ages – in the covenant commitment and the prophetic witness of the Hebrew Scriptures, in the community of the renewed covenant in Christ that is re-enacted in the eucharistic mystery and anchored in baptismal identification with Christ, and in the eternity and potential universality of this renewed covenantal life lived in the hope and the power of the resurrection.

Basic in this is the conviction that if God is as the Christian community claims, then that community is always to be judged in the light of the life that is revealed as God's. The contemporary significance of the Creed is thus not only in the way it sets before us a vision of divine action; because that divine action is always in relation within itself, it is never separable from relation, never an object. To say that God is thus and not otherwise is to commit ourselves to asking consistently what we are doing to be true to the relation into which we have been invited and incorporated; asking whether we are 'credible' as speakers of the *credo*. We are pressed by this relational reality to question ourselves and to be willing to begin again as disciples. And, if the preceding reflections have been in any way accurate, this involves a commitment to examining how we think about and negotiate the reality of *power* in human affairs. We have seen how the affirmation of the homoousion negates any model of divine life or action that conceives God as a solitary will, imposing itself on what it is not. Creative will is always grounded in interdependence, in the reality of mutual enrichment or lifegiving; whether in the community's life or in the life of humanity as a whole, there must be steady scrutiny



of habits and practices that privilege a self-defining, self-protecting will at the expense of recognizing dependence, growth and learning. To privilege or idealize such a will is ultimately to frustrate human creativity; if our life in the divine image includes our freedom to make others free, to give life, then any attempt to live in ways that refuse such freedom will guarantee sterility and self-destructiveness. The divine image exists in each person – but in each person as related to every other, answerable to any other who needs to be brought alive.

This in turn implies that hierarchy in the Church always stands under judgment; not that differentiated roles and decision-making structures are to be overturned (this would risk a comprehensive refusal of accountability), but that every act of a decision-making authority or individual is to be assessed in terms of its contribution to the sharing and nurture of life – more specifically, ‘life’ as the giving of life to the other and the receiving of life from the other, the movement of generative love. As we have hinted already, this is where a Nicene theology speaks into our environmental crisis: we live in a culture in which the denial and subversion of sustainable life in our environment is evidently built in to the power and decision-making of our major economic and political institutions. By sanctifying and colluding with these cultural dysfunctions and illusions, Christian language not only denies but actively frustrates the realizing of the divine image. And its own dysfunctions, embodied in various kinds of clericalism, in the unthinking reproduction in its own life of the exclusions and inequalities of the society around it (and its own reinforcement of exclusions and inequalities), embodied in imperial or autocratic patterns of control, need prayerful scrutiny and repeated challenge to become better vehicles of the Nicene vision. It is a simplification to think that rhetoric about ‘synodality’ alone will save us from illusions; we need a clear sense of what is concretely involved in setting one another free to become children of the heavenly Father – to become lifegivers themselves. And this requires not just a change in the ways we imagine and talk about authority in the Church, but an attention to spiritual practice, a clarity about the fundamental Nicene concern: are we truly opened up in the life of grace to nothing less than Christ’s eternal intimacy with the Father?

This in turn has implications for what we say about the Church’s sacramental life. The 381 text declares its trust in ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’ – in a community that is never completely defined by its location in time and space, yet is present in its fullness in each such local setting. It is catholic and apostolic: it is a ‘whole’ pattern of life and teaching that belongs with and seeks to be at home with the wholeness of humanity; and it is a community always contemporary

with the first foundational encounters with the incarnate and risen Logos, witnessing the resurrection as an event here and now, not simply an historical memory. The sacramental practice of the Church is the way in which this universal and inclusive perspective in time and space is renewed and vitalized in specific local communities. There is 'one bread, one Body': wherever and whoever we are, we are fed by the one Lord, and we come to his table admitting that we share one hunger, one need, for welcome, absolution and renewal in the image of Christ. We are participants here and now with the eternal prayer of Christ because we enter his risen life through the Spirit; we do not recall a distant prayer but immerse ourselves in the unchanging gift of the Son to his everlasting Source. Anything less than the Nicene vision would provide no foundation for this kind of sacramental life: a created Logos could do no more than animate and inspire praise directed to a solitary divine person who remains at an infinite distance.

But the Church's oneness and holiness are also deeply linked with the logic of Nicene theology. The credal text affirms the oneness of the creator and the oneness of the redeemer and their 'sameness' in substance with one another. Yet the one creator is the whole interrelated life of the trinity; the one Lord is the inseparable interconnection of divine and human life in Jesus Christ; the sameness of *ousia* is neither one thing absorbed in another nor two things co-ordinated with one another, but a radical and total mutuality. So when we go on, in the 381 text, to confess faith in 'one' Church, we recognize once again that our unexamined models of oneness stand under question. The Church is 'holy' with the holiness of Christ – as the Farewell Discourses in John's Gospel make plain (Jn 17.10,15-19); it inhabits the holy place where the incarnate Word lives, in intimacy with the Father, in intimacy with sinful and needy humanity. It does not stand at a distance from the divine life; and thus its unity must be the kind of unity that the divine life itself is. So the Fourth Gospel once more reminds us: we are to be where Christ is and to be one as the Logos is one with the Father (Jn 17, esp. 20-24).

The Church is one and holy because it shares in the threefold life of lifegiving, the mutual 'glorification' that we hear of in John's Gospel. And it is catholic and apostolic because it accompanies all its human neighbours – and, we must surely add, all its non-human neighbours also – throughout time. It lives in the life of the Logos in whom is the life that lives in the mutuality of creation, as it lives in the mutuality of the Godhead. The Spirit, the *parakletos*, who becomes fully identifiable in the light of the death and rising of Jesus, is the condition of our adoption into the process of 'lifegiving' – not just the overall pattern of mutuality in which all things exist, but the very

specific bringing-alive of the relation of intimacy with the Source within Godhead, the Father, which defines the entire life of Jesus of Nazareth and 'opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers', in the words of the *Te Deum*.

4.

We began this examination of the Nicene legacy with some reflection on the novel spiritual climate witnessed to in the language of the earliest Christian writings; these were the compositions of people who thought of themselves as having, though baptism, entered the Kingdom of Heaven while still being unmistakably active in human history. One way of understanding the significance of Nicaea is to read it as a meditation on the implications of believing that Christians live here and now 'in the Kingdom'. It is significant that there was a fairly widespread early Christian variant of the Lord's Prayer that had, instead of 'Thy Kingdom come', 'Thy Holy Spirit come and purify us,' and commentators like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor make much of this as pointing to a kind of functional equivalence between Spirit and Kingdom, both ways of designating the new creation in which human beings are endowed with the liberty to nurture life and contemplative love in one another. Against this background, it makes sense to say that the Creed is an act of witness to the reality of the new creation. The historic debates about whether or not the Logos was created by the will of the Father turn out to have direct implications for how we think of the creator-creation relation overall – not simply in terms of guaranteeing that the Logos is clearly seen as intrinsic to the creator's life, but in relation to how the threefold life of the creator guarantees the possibility of the new creation: the creator's life involves the eternal relation of 'generating', 'begetting', 'birthing', and so the possibility of a 'place' that can be occupied by a dependent and responsive life (like that of ourselves as creatures); and the creator's life also involves the inexhaustible energy of lifegiving. The generation of the Word is the generation not of a simple mirror of some fixed paternal identity, but of an eternal Offspring sharing the lifegiving energy from which it arises – sharing what some, including Gregory Palamas, are bold enough to refer to as the divine *eros*, the impulse to live for, in, and from the other, since there is no life without living for, in, and from the other. Like creation itself, therefore, the new creation is never an obligation for God, an impersonal or external necessity, but a natural crystallization of what the rhythm of divine life makes possible – creation brought to fruition by being aligned with and integrated into the eternal life of Source and Word and Spirit.

We have seen how the controversies that shaped the text of Nicaea originate in a set of concerns about how Christians are to speak so as to do fullest justice to the different imaginative and conceptual pressures created by the reality of a disorientingly new set of shared experiences and possibilities. The whole discourse around the meanings of 'spirit' as a term for what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus bestows on human beings extended what could be said about God and about humanity in ways that went on being challenging; and we have seen also how different strands in this discourse at times pulled in sharply different directions – towards a problematically 'mythological' picture of divine powers delegated to a heavenly viceroy, or towards a model of attunement with eternal divine wisdom. Neither model alone was able to capture the full range of new meanings for God and humanity; each had a 'comfort zone' in which its terminology worked quite well, each faced tensions when the horizon was broadened. The 'mythological' pattern continued to make powerful dramatic sense in liturgy, the wisdom vocabulary helped build bridges with metaphysical idioms of the day. Arius's contribution was an adventurous attempt to give the liturgical, 'heavenly high priest' vocabulary a clear philosophical grounding, by the simple expedient of identifying two ways of using the language of divine 'Logos' – as designating in the strict sense an eternal quality of God, and in an analogical sense a supramundane mediator uniquely endowed with grace. It is not hard to see both why this solution might have seemed a tidy one, and why it was ultimately unsatisfactory to inheritors of both theological idioms.

As I have been arguing in this second lecture, the question to which the Creed of Nicaea sought to provide some kind of answer was whether the novelty of the experience of 'spirit' as understood in the Christian communities actually mandated a comparable novelty in what could be said about the eternal life of God. The earlier conventions we have looked at did not provide any clarity on this; they wrestled uneasily with whether a 'second God' (a telling turn of phrase, not uncommon in the second and third centuries, but unthinkable later on) could be genuinely a distinct subject in the eternal divine life. The Nicene formula did not by any means put an end to debate; but – as is not always fully recognized – it *does* seem to have ended any enthusiasm for an Arius-style solution. Opponents of Nicaea in the decades that followed the Council were definitely not supporters of Arius, and it was something of a propaganda coup on the part of Athanasius and his party to persuade so many that opposing Nicaea left you finally with no rational alternative to Arius's theology.

And this new clarity about the need to identify what new things had to be said about God in the light of the reality of the gift of 'spirit' in Jesus opened the door to a new clarity about the dignity and destiny of humanity. The image restored by Christ is now defined more fully as a share in the eternal relation of Son to Father in the Trinity, and the Holy Spirit's role in bringing this about becomes in turn part of the argument for ascribing an unequivocal divine status to the Third Person. As we have noted, this reinforces a more active or dynamic doctrine of the divine image: it is not simply the bestowal of certain capacities on humanity that is in view but the exercise of those capacities in contemplation (building on the legacy of Origen especially) and in what I have been calling 'lifegiving': the image is realized in the selfless service of the neighbour – a theme developed notably in the writings on the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes by that great commentator on the Nicene faith, Gregory of Nyssa.

In sum, the continuing importance of Nicaea and its creed has to do above all with this 'maximalism' about both God and humanity (and, crucially, the world in which humanity shares): we seek to say the most that can be said about the eternity of God's relational and covenantal love, its nature as intrinsic to the divine life; and also the most that can be said about the destiny of a created order whose ultimate end is loving harmony within the life of the Trinity, an order in which human agents have a distinctive dignity as called to use both love and intelligence to nurture that loving harmony. The creed of 325 is not the last word: the early Church was entirely aware of that. But – to quote the Psalmist in the older English version- its effect was to 'set our feet in a large room' (Ps.31.8), a 'spacious place'. That is the place we seek to keep open in our meditations on this anniversary of the Council and the Symbol of Faith that it bequeathed to the entire Christian family across the centuries.