‘For in Christ, all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.’

I

Today the lectionary prescribes two extraordinarily powerful passages. In the Book of Job, God speaks ‘out of the whirlwind’, and the poetic energy of his words reflects the dynamism of that vortex:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Who shut in the sea with doors
When it burst out from the womb?
When I made the clouds its garment,
And thick darkness its swaddling band;
And prescribed bounds for it,
And set bars and doors;
And said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no further,
And here shall your proud waves be stopped?

Here, God, as in the Book of Genesis, is the one and only creator of the world; all-powerful, exalted, eternal. You may be able to picture William Blake’s illustration of this text. God is surrounded by a circle of lightning and whirling winds, suspended in the eye of the storm. His hair and beard are long and white; a King Lear-like figure. But so too is Job depicted. They could be twins. And that’s where Blake’s engraving misleads. God in this passage is wholly other, on an entirely different plane from Job, and all human beings.
In our N.T. reading, from Paul’s letter to the Church in Colossae, we have another beautiful, poetic passage - and one that makes astonishing claims about Christ. It’s likely that Paul uses here an already existing hymn or creed. He employs this hymn to counteract doubts about Christ’s supremacy.

What are called ‘mystery cults’ were prevalent at the time in what is today western Turkey. These cults believed in a Wagnerian panoply of superhuman forces, angels and demons, with power over human destiny, and Paul contradicts these superstitions with the confident assertion that Christ is lord of all, creator and redeemer:

‘He is the image of the invisible God. In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . – all things have been created through him, and for him. He is himself before all things, and in him all things hold together’.

Paul is struggling here to say what must have seemed outrageous and impossible - that Jesus Christ, and the one, almighty, eternal creator God described in Job, are as near to being one and the same as it’s possible to say. ‘For in him’, Paul writes, ‘all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell’. The word ‘fulness’, pleroma in Greek, means the whole being and power of God.

II

A passage like this in Colossians helped provide the early Church, first, with confidence in its conviction that the risen Christ is divine; and second, with the raw materials for working out how this could be. How, in other words, it could be said that Jesus Christ is to be identified with the one, all-powerful creator God of the Old Testament. And I want if I can to explain how the struggle with words and meanings that this required, has left us today with doctrines that, though they try as hard as they can to speak as they should of one God, they more often seem to be
speaking of two; and this is, I think, a common and serious problem for Christians.

Let me give you a thumbnail sketch of how these doctrines came about. Some of the first Christian theologians turned to the Word, the Logos, of God to provide a convenient concept for squaring the circle, for explaining how it can be that Jesus Christ is God.

In Hebrew tradition, the Word meant not Scripture but God’s creative power. God and his Word were not therefore two separate beings, but at the same time, they were not identical. The Word is God, and yet the Word is distinguishable from God, and so this idea was useful. Here’s St John at the famous start of his gospel, identifying Christ with God’s Word:

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’

So, already, you can see there’s creeping into Christian theology, right at the start, a sense that there are two beings here, despite every effort to say there’s one. There’s God the almighty creator, and there’s the Word of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ.

By the end of the second century, talk of Christ as the Word of God had been largely replaced in the Church by talk of Christ as the Son of God, and now there really is a sense that there are two different and distinct divine beings, a Father and his Son.

‘Son of God’ is another term borrowed from Jewish scriptures. It’s often used to describe kings and princes, and, most importantly, the long-awaited Messiah. When Jesus asks his disciples ‘Who do you say that I am?’, Peter replies, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of God.’ And Jesus applies the title to himself. He prays too to God as ‘Abba’, Father, and
this seems Jesus’ way of expressing the extraordinary closeness he felt to God.

But the important point is that father and son are metaphors, that, as time went on, were treated almost literally, as though God really is of male gender, and capable of fathering a son. That itself is a scandal to many Christians today because it’s patriarchal and gender-biased. But my concern is that these are human metaphors. And it’s taking these human metaphors literally that’s the problem. So not only did there seem to be two gods here, but one of them is older, and, as a father, superior to his son.

That belief was not unusual in the early Church, and was taught most notoriously by an Alexandrian priest called Arius. The Father, he wrote, had begotten the Son, who, therefore, unlike the Father, had a beginning of existence.

Arius had plenty of followers to whom this teaching seemed entirely Christian. But others felt uneasy, and the rest of the story is well known. In 325 the Christian emperor Constantine summoned the bishops to Nicaea. Arius’s teaching was rejected as heresy, and what became the Nicene Creed proclaimed the orthodox view. ‘We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.’ You can hear these words straining to affirm that God the Father and God the Son are one and equal, ‘true God from true God’, but they don’t escape the metaphor of Father and Son, and therefore they cannot escape the sense that God is not one, but divided into two.
Today, nearly seventeen hundred years later, we still recite the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist. It is still a statement of orthodox belief, and it’s ensured over the centuries that other ways of believing have been rejected. So we are still prone to see God as a divided being - as the Father, the transcendent, all-powerful creator; as the Son, who became flesh and lived among us; and third, as the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies the Church. In other words, a Trinity, one God but in three persons, and it’s the idea of three persons not one God, that I suggest easily dominates Christian understanding.

This has serious implications for other important areas of Christian belief. Take, for example, the wonder, the miracle, of incarnation; that extraordinary belief of ours that God enters human history as a man, to live a human life, and die a human death. That marvellous belief is weakened when it’s said that it’s God’s Son, not God himself, whom we encounter in Jesus. And what answer do we have then to the problem of suffering? The comfort and hope to be had from believing that it’s God himself who suffered on the cross, God himself who bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, is weakened by believing that it’s not quite God, but God’s Son who hangs and suffers on the cross. And think what a mockery is made of atonement, of the idea common in some Christian circles, that Calvary is to be understood as an angry, righteous Father who demands punishment for our wickedness, but who shows mercy by sending his Son to pay the price of sin. What kind of God, and what kind of love, is this?

IV

I want to conclude by saying that there is another, and I think truer way of understanding the Trinity, and especially here what’s meant by Father and Son. It’s a way with roots in another heresy; and though he doesn’t quite say so, it’s a heresy that’s given new expression in a recent and fascinating book by Keith Ward, a former Regius Professor of Divinity, and Canon here at Christ Church.
The heretic was a third century priest from Libya, called Sabellius. His teaching, Sabellianism, has been described as ‘the most sensible of the great heresies.’ The Sabellians wanted very properly to preserve monotheism, the belief in one God, which, they too thought, was threatened by the language of Father and Son. So to them there is one, single, indivisible God, but a God who reveals himself in three different ways: as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. These revelations have been called Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but they are not to be seen literally as distinct persons, but instead as one God, revealing himself in three particular ways. It was said at the time that a close analogy may be found in the sun. It’s one star, but it has three manifestations: light, heat and energy. So Christ is God, God manifesting himself in the world as a man, and it is therefore God himself, and not just a part of him, who suffers on the cross. It seems to me that we have here not only a truer, more accurate understanding of the Trinity, but a far more powerful and compelling one.

Keith Ward’s book is called Christ and the Cosmos. It is, he says, a restatement of the Trinity for the 21st century. He too adopts an understanding not unlike that of the Sabellians, and in his case he does so in order to take seriously our greatly expanded knowledge of the universe.

Ward reminds us that in Biblical times the universe consisted of the earth at the centre, with stars above, like lamps in the sky. Now, he says, ‘we know that there are a hundred billion stars in the Milky Way, a hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe, and possibly untold numbers of universes other than this one.’ It is therefore, he suggests, more than likely that are other forms of intelligent life in the cosmos; life created by the same one creator God, and to which, we may assume, he has also revealed himself. But it is, argues Ward, most unlikely that God will have done so in the ways that are appropriate for humans. ‘God’, he writes, ‘may be known by other beings in very different ways than those in which God is known by us.’ (p. 251)
So Ward rejects the traditional human-shaped idea of God as a sort of society of three persons. This, he says, ‘is more misleading than helpful’ (145). It cannot be a complete description of the creator of the whole cosmos. The Trinity is best understood therefore as three modes or manifestations of the one God in our world and our Church. This is how we humans have experienced how God has revealed himself to us, but they can’t add up to an exclusive and exhaustive picture of the very being of God. ‘Thus’, writes Ward, ‘we might say that God has disclosed Himself to us in ways suited to our understanding – as Father, Son, and Spirit. But that does not entitle us to say that the way in which God appears to us is the way in which God must appear to all possible beings’.

(pp. 106f)

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And that reminds us, finally, that the whole truth about God will always outstrip our understanding, however hard we try. ‘Can you fathom the mystery of God’, asks the Book of Job. ‘Can you fathom the perfection of the Almighty?’ Amen