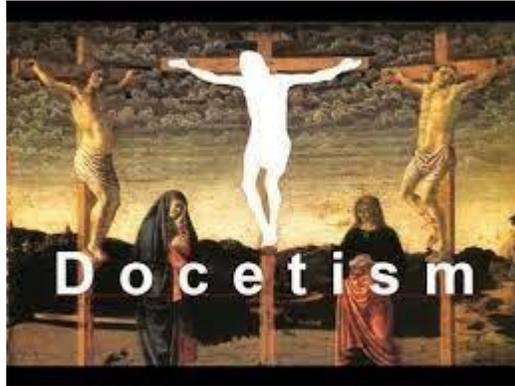


DOCETISM: WHO WAS JESUS?



Philippians 2:5-9 where St. Paul writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death --- even death on a cross."

During the first centuries after Jesus' death, much of the debate in the Church centered upon the simple question, "Who was Jesus?" Theologians call this the question of Christology. And while all Christians agreed that Jesus was a unique revelation from God, the more specific responses to that question varied from group to group, and from culture to culture. Jesus, for example, was understood by some as unquestionably the long expected Jewish Messiah, by others as a divine emissary sent from God to provide us the means of salvation, by others he was

viewed simply as a holy man and teacher, and by some as the Son of God, whatever that means, and it meant vastly different things to different people.

Last week, we noted how the Christian community quickly spread from a Middle Eastern Jewish background out into a Greek and Roman world, and how it adapted itself to new thinking and cultures. In classical Greek philosophy, for example, there is a basic acknowledged dualism between spirit and matter. And for Plato and Aristotle, spiritual things were by nature eternal and unchanging, and thus considered beautiful, and true, real, and good. While material things in comparison were those which were ever changing, and thus were considered base, unreal, false, and even bad.

As a result of this basic Greek dualism, physical matter was often perceived as intrinsically corrupt, and spiritual things as inherently divine. Look again, for instance, at what St. Paul writes in today's Epistle: "Live by the Spirit, (he says), and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh." This kind of command to shun the material world for higher things led to the rise of much ascetism and monasticism in the early Church, as Christians struggled in their spiritual lives to escape our natural

enslavement to the world, the flesh, and the devil, as we saw in last week's sermon on Gnosticism.

There were problems then for the Greek thinkers about how the physical and spiritual worlds could or could not interact with each other. For instance, how could a good God create this corrupt, evil material world of ours? That is a question that sometimes still haunts us today. Some early Christian thinkers solved the problem by simply teaching that there were two gods, an evil one who created the material world and a good God who created the things of the spirit. The most famous promoter of this notion was Marcion, the son of a bishop in Asia Minor in the first half of the second century. For Marcion, the God of the Old Testament, who was the God of the Law, and the one who created the material world, had nothing in common with the God of the New Testament, the God of Love, the God of Jesus Christ. One had only to read the Scriptures, Marcion argued, to see that the Old Testament God was fickle, capricious, ignorant, jealous, despotic, and cruel at times. This was not the God of Jesus, the God of Love, our Father in heaven. Thus, Marcion insisted, it was the Creator God who caused Jesus' suffering and who ultimately put Jesus to death. But Jesus' Resurrection was the final proof of the superiority of the God of Love over the God of Law. Marcion thus rejected the entire Old Testament as Scripture and put together the first Christian Bible, which

consisted of the letters of Paul that he had at the time and the Gospel of Luke, who was a native of that region. Marcionism was declared heretical and much opposed in the second century, though there was a resurgence of his thinking with the rise of the sects of the Albigensians and the Cathari which spread through southern France, northern Italy, and into Germany in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries.

Another problem with understanding material things as corrupt is that a good God cannot come into contact with evil matter. And if not, how then can a divine spirit really become incarnate in a physical body? For many Greek Christians that was simply unthinkable. God could not truly become Incarnate in man, because spirit and matter cannot really mix together; they are opposites. And since for many Christians, there was little doubt of Jesus' divine nature, the reality of his humanity was what was often questioned or denied.

Therefore, for some of these Christians, Jesus did not, he could not, have had a real human body, it must only have appeared to have been real. This group was known as the Docetics, from the Greek word meaning "to seem" or "to appear," because in their understanding Jesus only appeared to have had a material body. Recall that passage from Philippians again, but this time with a Docetic point of view, where Jesus we are told "took on the *form* of a slave, *assuming* human likeness. *And being*

found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death." Jesus took on the form of humanity, but not the reality of it, these Docetics insisted. Such 1st-century Christian groups developed these docetic interpretations partly as a way to make Christian teachings more acceptable to pagan ways of thinking about divinity.

The actual word Docetics or "Illusionists" referring to early groups who denied Jesus's humanity first occurred in a letter by Bishop Serapion of Antioch at the end of the second century (197-203). His Christian community in Rhodus regularly used the Gospel of Peter in their liturgy, and continued to do so right into the fifth century. That Gospel is perfectly orthodox, except perhaps for one verse that Bishop Serapion thought might be interpreted as favorable to Docetists, where it reads that after the crucifixion "(Jesus) was silent as having no pain," thus suggesting that Jesus was not really human and was instead a divine being that cannot suffer. That was too much for some and doomed the Gospel of Peter from becoming a part of the Christian Bible. Christ could not have really suffered or died, thought the Docetics, for he was divine, and thus he must only have appeared to have done so. In some cases, the Docetics claimed that Jesus miraculously escaped death because Simon of Cyrene in one case, or Judas Iscariot in another, changed places with Jesus just before the crucifixion. Other Docetics simply

pointed to the Resurrection as proof that Jesus never really suffered or died.

Other groups who were accused of Docetism held that Jesus was a man in the flesh, but Christ was a separate entity who entered Jesus' body in the form of a dove at his baptism, empowered him to perform miracles, and abandoned him upon his death on the cross. Another group of Docetics, for instance, believed that Jesus in his divine humanity perfectly consumed all that he ate and drank, so that there was never any human waste from his body.

An explicit rejection of Docetism came early, and is clearly expressed in the First Letter of St. John, written around the turn of the first century, chapter 4:2 "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus (has come in the flesh) is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world." The Apostles' Creed at the mid second century also denies both Marcion and Docetism. Marcion's idea of two Gods is rejected in the very first line of creed, that "*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*" Docetism is then denied in the second paragraph of the Creed where it insists that Jesus was "*born of the Virgin Mary, He suffered under Pontius Pilate,*

was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead," that is, that he really suffered and really died. Finally in the last paragraph of the Apostles' Creed is affirmation of the belief in "*the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,*" as opposed to the Greek idea of only spiritual immortality.

Despite the Apostles' Creed, Docetic thinking persisted in the Church in various forms for many centuries. The Manichees, for example, founded by a Christian named Mani, a Persian in the 3rd century, spread the farthest, from its beginnings in Persia to Egypt, Rome, and North Africa in one direction, and across Turkestan in the other, where it survived into the 13th century. The Manichees were renowned for their asceticism and their endeavors for an otherworldly state of perfection and spiritual freedom from the body, and it was this that attracted St. Augustine of Hippo into their midst for a while at the end of the third century.

And despite suppression and persecution, Docetic influences still exist within the Church today. The Greek distinction between spiritual and material things, for instance, has become a standard part of Western thought. And spiritual things are usually still considered of higher value, while material things are still viewed as inferior and base. Our Puritan forefathers, for example, clearly reflect some of the Docetics' dislike and

suspicion of the body and its natural functions, a suspicion which has become, I believe, a fundamental part of the American culture.

And like the Docetics, many contemporary Christians often preserve Jesus' divinity by whittling away at his humanity, until Jesus is not human like us at all. To err is human, we say, but not so with Jesus, who we are told did not sin, who was also born of a Virgin like some Greek God, and whose mother was herself then had to be Immaculately Conceived to keep him pure. And to die is human, we say, but Jesus doesn't really die, does he? And Jesus seems to know the specific details of his Resurrection before his death, so how can we say that he suffered a real human death? Or does he only appear to die then?

The very heart of the Christian doctrines of Creation and the Incarnation is that spirit and matter are not opposed to one another, that they are not separate from one another, and that they are instead both intrinsically virtuous. All creation was declared good by our God at Creation, and innately reflects the goodness of our Creator, just we as humans embody the image of God in each one of us. In the end, as I said before, Christians seek not to escape the world or the human predicament, but like Jesus, to transform it, or perhaps to restore it to its natural state of grace. AMEN