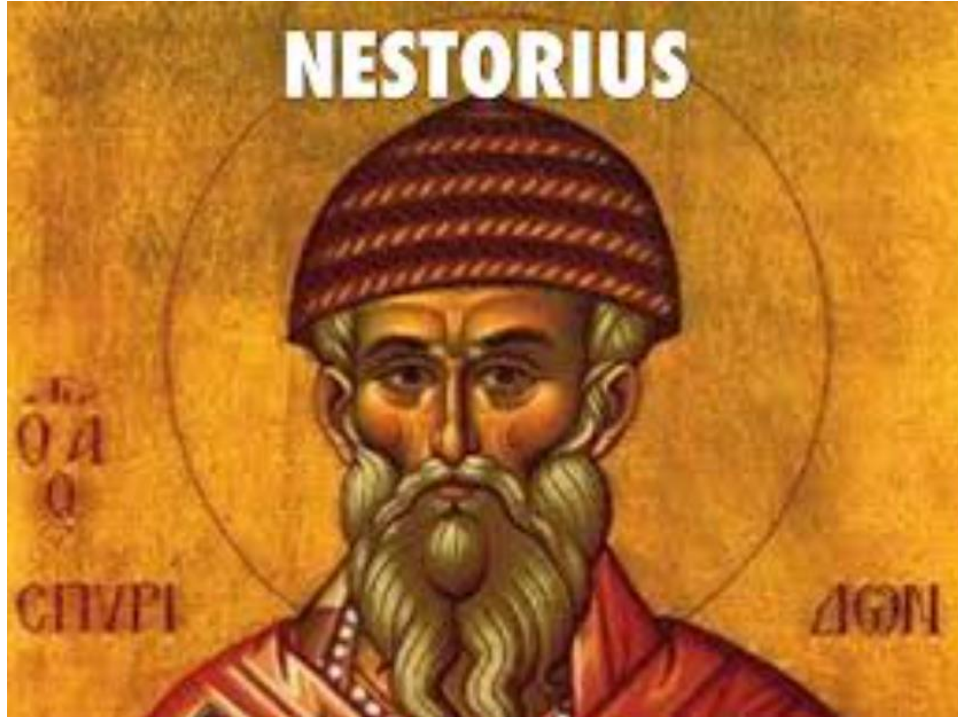


NESTORIANISM: GOD IS ONE



Hebrews 2:14 "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, (Jesus) himself likewise shared the same things, . . . For it is clear that (Jesus) did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. . ."

This is the third of four sermons on conflicts in the early Church that I have been preaching about this summer in a series called "A Month of Heresies." As we saw last week, one of the questions with which the first Christians struggled was an understanding of the person of Jesus, what theologians call the

question of Christology. The problem last week with the Docetics, for example, was that they seemed to deny the real humanity of Jesus. Affirming both Jesus' humanity and his divinity was considered an essential ingredient of any orthodox theology, and yet it was and still is a very difficult balance to maintain.

As if often the case in such controversies, there were two great schools of thought which fought with one another over these issues about Jesus' humanity and his divinity, one located in the great city of Alexandria, where there was an early and important Christian Catechetical school, founded according to tradition by St. Mark the Evangelist as Jerome later testified, but more likely started by St. Clement of Alexandria at the end of the first century of the Common Era, and the other great Catechetical school was in Antioch of Syria, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians according to the book of Acts, and which was the community that sent out Barnabas and Paul as early missionaries to Asia Minor, and then to Greece.

The Antiochene school was more Middle Eastern in its understanding, more Semitic in its heritage, and thus less sophisticated than the Greeks in Alexandria. The Antiochene school was inclined to promote a rather loose and undelineated connection between the divine and human natures in Jesus, emphasizing a distinction between them, while the Hellenized

intellectuals of Alexandria tended toward a Christology that emphasized the union of the human and the divine in Jesus.

The Antiochene school's importance in this controversy really only surfaced when one of their students, Nestorius, the Abbot of a large monastery in Constantinople, was elected the Patriarch of Constantinople, perhaps the most powerful see in the Church in the fourth century, which gained prominence after the Emperor Constantine the Great built that city on the Bosphorus as the "New" Rome, but which instead simply took his name. Nestorius was a renowned preacher, but he had the habit in his preaching, in opposition to the Docetics, of carefully affirming the human nature of Jesus when it was at work in his life, as well as when the divine nature was active. For example, when Jesus cried at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, that was obviously the human side of Jesus, 'see how human, how much like us, he is.' However, moments later when Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, that was an activity of Jesus' divine nature, one that fills us with awe and wonder.

The Alexandrian school was much more intellectual and Platonic in their outlook than Antioch. And thus, the Alexandrians did not like the looseness of unity in the Antiochene version of the two natures of Jesus. It seemed schizophrenic to them. One minute Jesus was human, the next he was divine. But their real opposition to Nestorius came when he

as Patriarch of Constantinople rejected for the Virgin Mary the popular title, "Theotokos," which translates "bearer of God," and preferred instead the title for Mary of "Christotokos," or "bearer of Christ." In this, the Alexandrians were suspicious that Nestorius was not adequately acknowledging the divine nature of Jesus, which thus brought him in conflict with Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria.

Cyril went to the Bishop of Rome, Pope Celestine I, who offered his support to request that Nestorius recant his position or face excommunication. Nestorius in turn went to the Emperor, Theodosius II, to call a council in which all these grievances could be heard, hoping that he would be vindicated and Cyril condemned. So, the infamous Third Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church was called in 431 to be held at Ephesus, the city where Christian tradition says that the Virgin Mary spent the last years of her life.

Approximately 250 bishops attended, though the bishops arrived in Ephesus over a period of several weeks, and while waiting for others to arrive, they engaged in informal discussions characterized as tending to exasperate rather than heal their differences. Severe tensions arose between Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, and the Roman Emperor Theodosius, especially when Cyril called a start to the Council before the Antiochene party had even arrived. Cyril with the help of the

Bishop of Rome, had Nestorius' teachings condemned, and Nestorius deposed as the Bishop of Constantinople and excommunicated. So, Nestorius went back to his monastery in Antioch, but was later banished to Upper Egypt where he died. (You begin to see clearly here the political and civic power struggles at work in the early Church after Constantine)

As often happens in such conflicts, many in the Alexandrian school became overly zealous in their opposition to Nestorianism. Apollinaris, the Bishop of Laodicea, for example, pointed out that in humans there coexist a body, a soul, and a spirit. Jesus, he argued, had a real human body and soul, but his human spirit was replaced by the Divine Logos itself, so that Jesus was innately Divine, in opposition to Nestorius. But Jesus then also lacked a complete humanity, for he now had no human spirit.

Eutyches, a priest and archimandrite in Constantinople took another tact, purporting that while Jesus had both a human and divine nature before the Incarnation, after that Union only one nature remained, the Divine. Eutyches was then the founder of Monophysitism, 'mono' one, 'physis' nature, i.e. the doctrine that in the Person of the Incarnate Christ there was but a single Nature and that being Divine. Eutyches illustrated the two natures by comparing the pouring of a chalice of wine into the Mediterranean Sea, while the two things are mixed, the

vastness of the sea overwhelms the wine, so that it is indiscernible in the end, just as the vastness of Jesus' divine nature obliterated his human side.

This whole question was violently debated within the Church for decades and I mean violently, with various mobs set upon certain bishops, who were beaten, or upon certain churches, which were burned to the ground. Finally, the teachings of Nestorius, Apollinaris, and Eutyches were all condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which produced the now famous Chalcedonian formula of the two natures of Christ, found in the historical section of your Prayerbook. That formula affirms that in Christ that are 'two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.' Jesus is thus both fully human and fully Divine. Two natures, one Person.

Even so there continues to this day certain Monophysite Churches who refused to accept the decisions of Chalcedon, namely, the Armenian Church, the Coptic Church in Egypt, the Abyssinian Church in Ethiopia, and the Syrian Orthodox Church in Syria. There also still exist Nestorian Churches, known collectively as the Church of the East, as distinguished from the Roman Catholic or the Eastern Orthodox branches of the Church. They include the Assyrian Church, the Chaldean Syrian Church, the Syrian Christians of India, and the Chaldean Catholic Church. The Church of the East was suppressed by

generations of Mongols and then Islamic Arabs where they had one flourished in Persia, India, and the Middle East, to survive today mostly in the mountains of Kurdistan, though I recently attended a worship service at an Assyrian Christian Church in Los Angeles.

In the end, I am suspicious of those Christians who think they have Jesus' nature all figured out, those sophisticated thinkers today who seem to believe that they can adequately and accurately explain the mysteries of the Church, like how Jesus' human and divine natures are wed. For while the Nestorians may have failed to safeguard the divinity of Jesus, Apollinaris and the Monophysites in their thinking allowed the humanity of Jesus is pressed to a point where the human side of Jesus was lost altogether, no more schizophrenia for sure, but no more real humanity either.

My objections to this are many, but primarily that this is simply not a true picture of Jesus. For the Gospel stories themselves portray a very human Jesus, who not only cries at the tomb of his friend, and enjoys the children at his feet, but also gets angry in the Temple, despairs in the Garden of Gethsemane and agonizes upon the Cross. As the author of Hebrews wrote, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are." But perhaps St. Athanasius, the great

writer on the Incarnation, said it best, "God became man, that man might become God," i.e., that in order to save us, God broke down the barrier between us by himself taking on our full humanity, suffering with us, and thus for us.

Yet there is still a tendency today among many Christians to see only the Divine nature in Jesus, and to obliterate or at least be suspicious of those like Nestorius who stress his human side. The piety of many modern Christians, especially conservatives, is often centered on a wholly unearthly and unreal Divine figure. Jesus is too often seen as different from us, and thus separated from us, he in his transcendent majesty, and glory, and we in our everyday human world of pain and doubt.

The practical result of this kind of thinking is that there remains a gulf between us. The Kingdom of God then is not a place for humans, but some spiritual realm, otherworldly, as it was for Luther, and thus it can sometimes have little relevance for us here and now, and it often has little chance of transforming this world, or our lives. It is only a future hope after death and can never be a present reality. And maybe that's why we like it so much. It is a way of keeping Jesus at arm's length, of treating him as a special instance of the indwelling of humanity by the Divine, not like us at all. God is in his Heaven and all's right with the world, as long as he stays there. That gap between God and us often remains unbridged, the

barrier unbroken. Thus, the Divine Christ may awe us, may fill us with wonder and reverence and hope, but he cannot challenge us or engage us because he is so different from us, a special case of humanity, not really like us at all, and we may prefer it that way. For it is in the end the human face of Jesus, which is most frightening to us, because in it we can see ourselves.

AMEN