1. One God

We believe in one God...

An opening question that you may like to ponder or discuss with others: “Does the doctrine of the Trinity, which can seem abstract and obscure, influence our relation to or our care for creation?”

A further challenging thought: in 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', an article published in Science by Lynn White Jr. in 1967, he suggests that “especially in its western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen”. He goes on to note in the article that the reason for this is that the God of Christianity is a removed, transcendent God. Since human beings are thought of as this God’s representatives on earth, they can never feel quite at home on the earth.

But is this right?

“It’s a Mystery!”

This first chapter starts at the beginning and explores how the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Council of Nicaea in particular, essentially crystalised the Christian theology of God and creation in a unique way. The uniqueness of Nicene theology empowers us to live well in our material reality. We will look at how Nicaea inaugurated a new way of thinking about God and God’s relationship with the world, and what this means for us today.

Just about any time the discussion of the Trinity comes up, we tend to resort to the very true statement, “It’s a mystery!” The Trinity is a mystery that invites us into deeper prayer, worship, and contemplation. The doctrine of the Trinity challenges our understanding, forcing us to confront the limits of our thoughts and turn in awe-struck wonder to the ineffable Creator in whom we live and move and have our being. But we also do not wish to flippantly “play the mystery card” when we feel out of our depths theologically. Indeed, the Trinity is a mystery. That is indisputable. But we have to be clear about how and why the Trinity, or any doctrine for that matter, is mysterious.

If we were to say that God is a squared circle and someone challenged this assertion by asking whether it makes sense, it would be irresponsible of us to skirt the irrationality of the statement by saying, “It’s a mystery!” But in reality, that’s not a mystery, that is merely a contradiction. At the Council of Nicaea, the bishops gathered had vigorous debates about God: they were attempting to render the mysterious coherent, while understanding and accepting that God is incomprehensible. They did not convene the council, declare that God is a mystery, and then go home. They thought long and hard about their terms, ideas, and positions, and argued endlessly about them. They agonised over what, precisely, constitutes the mystery at the heart of our faith.

As inheritors of Nicaea, we are privileged to benefit from the progress they made at the council, and are called to carry on in this tradition of exploring the beauty of divine mystery. This does not mean we need to share their level of understanding or insight. Rather it means that we are to take the mystery of the Trinity as seriously as we can, working on the foundation provided through Scripture, reason, and tradition. In other words, we should speak the language of mystery without speaking nonsense. This is holy work, and it is hard work. So let’s take a look at some of the work that was done at Nicaea, and how it offers us a mystery that carries enduring implications for the life of the church within creation.

The Creator-Creature Distinction

As the theologian David Bentley Hart explains, Nicaea not only helped establish the doctrine of the Trinity, it also revolutionised our understanding of the Creator-Creature distinction (Hart, The Hidden and the Manifest, pp. 147-148). We know that the Creator is different from creation, but how? And if Creator and creature are so different, how can they relate and interact with one another? Prior to Nicaea, the default theology of the time claimed that God differed from creation in terms of degree (Hart, Theological Territories, pp. 35-36). Imagine a ladder: at the bottom of the ladder is the underworld of Hades. Now imagine that you are looking at the ladder, your eyes going from the bottom rung upward. You look a few rungs up, you would come to the surface of the earth; looking higher, you reach the skies, then the starry heavenly realms with their angels, then the various levels of heaven with their inhabitants. Then, at the absolute top of the ladder is God. This is a slightly crude analogy, but it captures how the ancient Greco-Roman world pictured the cosmos.

But, you may ask, "How far up the ladder is God? If God is at the top of the ladder, how far would we need to climb to get there?: Here's the catch: if God is separated from material reality in terms of degree, or in this metaphor, in terms of distance, then the distance between God and material creation must be infinite. If the distance were not infinite, God's holiness and transcendent otherness may be compromised (Hart, Theological Territories, p.35). God must be holy and unique from creation. And in order to preserve this uniqueness, the "buffer zone" between God and material creation must be infinite. Otherwise, the divine may be contaminated by the material world, getting absorbed into it, or the other way around.

To revise the ladder analogy, you could keep looking up at the ladder, but your eye would never be able to reach the top. The distance was just too far. That being said, this picture of the cosmos did not claim that God could not interact with the material world. But it posited that there is an unfathomable distance between us and God, and the only way for interaction was if God could descend down to the earth. Often, God would use emissaries (angels, for example), to do God's bidding and bridge that gulf.

Enter the great debates at Nicaea. The Church was faced with the conundrum of how to understand Jesus, the Son, and his relationship with the Father. The Father is indeed God, but where does the Son fit into all this? And what of the even more elusive Holy Spirit? Approaching those questions with the "ladder" framework in which God is separated from earthly reality in terms of degree, we can see how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could easily slot in. As Hart notes, this was the appeal of Arianism, which taught that the Son and Spirit are created as close to God the Father, but not coeternal or coequal with God. According to Arianism, the Father is God, dwelling at an infinite distance from the created order as we know it. The Son is created by the Father, but is just a few rungs down from the Father. The Son is close to the Father but not equal with the Father. The Spirit was also similar. Since the Son and the Spirit were a bit lower than God, they could help "bridge the gap" between humanity and God. Given the thinking of the day, this was all quite tidy (*Hart, You Are Gods, pp. 91-92)*.

Yet the Council of Nicaea was not satisfied with Arianism. The bishops at the Council had discerned that the Son was more than just a created (albeit lofty) being. The Son, identified with Jesus of Nazareth, seemed to be much more than a creature that was close with God. Indeed, the Jesus revealed in Scripture and in the worshiping life of the Church seemed to be none other than God, full stop. Such a conviction grew out of Jesus' teachings and proclamations, his actions, and how the church experienced Christ's presence. This was more than an elevated celestial being; this was God. Later, the church would reflect similarly on the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit testified to the work of God as God. It seemed impossible to make sense of the Spirit without attributing full divinity to the Spirit, and in the years following Nicaea, the Creed would come to clarify this.

So the Council of Nicaea did something unprecedented. They overturned the entire framework of thinking about Creator and creature. Instead of describing the Creator-creature distinction in terms of degree, they described it in terms of kind. They got rid of the ladder altogether. Yes, they said, God is transcendent and holy, but this transcendence and holiness is of an entirely different kind than creation. And since God is different in kind, no distance was needed to separate God from materiality, Creator from creature. One way of framing this Nicaean understanding of God is what Kathryn Tanner describes as a non-competitive relationship (Tanner, Christ the Key, p. 296). God does not compete for space with creation, nor does creation compete for space with God. God can be fully present in creation, and this in no way diminishes creation. Quite the contrary: creation only exists insofar as God is fully active within it. We know from physics that two physical objects, like two stones, for example, cannot occupy the same place at the same time. They are too similar: they need to take up space in the same way to exist. In other words, they are in competition with one another. But the Creator-Creature distinction is different. Because God is so different in kind, God can occupy the exact same space as us without diminishing us or competing with us, and without God being diminished in any way.

Photo by Max Bürgi on Unsplash

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all fully God, and as God, are fully present within the material world. The Father, to whom we have not dedicated a stand-alone chapter in the course, is described as the "maker of heaven and earth". The Son is the one "through whom all things were made". And the Holy Spirit is the "giver of life". Having made and loved the world, they continue to sustain it, as one God without end.

So what does all of this mean for a theology of creation and creation care?
If, in the Greco-Roman way of thinking, God must be infinitely distant from the material world, then that implies that we must somehow get beyond the material world in order to "ascend the ladder" to divinity. However, if the material world is not a threat to God, but is rather a concrete manifestation of the Triune love of God, then it becomes a place in which God's presence can be seen and experienced. No more need for distance or infinite degrees of separation. Thanks to Nicaea, we can understand the material world, which includes but is not limited to humans, as a point of contact between the Creator and creature.

"God so loved the world…"

The non-competitive relationship between Creator and creature means that the affirmation from John 3:16 that "God so loved the world…" is more radical than we may first assume. When we read in John's Gospel that God so loved the world, the Greek word for "world" is cosmos. "God so loved the world" is not a statement that I can simply appropriate for myself, as an individualistic concept related to my salvation. Nor is it a statement that humanity can simply appropriate for the sake of humanity, as an anthropocentric concept of salvation. The Christian imagination enables us to understand that God loves all that God has made, not only humanity, and that God in Christ died to save all that exists. As communities of faith, how might we engage more fully with the radical nature of this affirmation?

God can love creation eternally and unconditionally because God is not in competition with creation. As humans, we are tempted to focus on our own needs rather than the needs of others. We are finite creatures with limited resources, so our ability to express love faces limits: there is only so much of ourselves that we can give. This is not a bad thing; it's just part of being finite. But God is infinite and has no needs. And because God has no needs, God can love creation without reserve. At no point does God need to "retreat" in order to take care of God's own self for a while.

God's non-competitive love for creation is a source of extraordinary comfort in times of scarcity. Loving us could never "deplete" God's resources. God is a wellspring of infinite love that is never in competition with God's creation. At no point does God have to choose between loving God and loving creation. God's love of creation is an outworking of God's own nature, and God's nature never changes.

God's abundance and unconditionality is also of great comfort to those who are striving for the wellbeing of creation, especially eco-activists, who feel that they cannot do enough. We are not responsible for God's well-being, nor do we need to "earn" God's love. We can draw from this wellspring of love without being worried about whether we are "taking too much" or whether God will take a step back.

When Christians act in the best interest of creation, we act in the name of the Trinity. The Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have created this world and called it good. As image-bearers of the Triune God, we are called to embody this divine love on earth, for the earth. Appreciation and care for the material world in which God's presence is made manifest becomes, in this framework, not only a responsibility but a joyous act of worship.

Discussion Questions

- Is the image of the ladder, representing the infinite distance between God and creation, familiar? If so, how did you come to think this way?

- Do you think of caring for creation as an aspect of the worship of God? Why or why not?

- Occasionally discussions about justice, whether ecological justice or other forms, can devolve into worries about competition. If we advocate for ecological justice, can we also adequately advocate for other needs? Is there enough concern and activism to go around? It may be interesting to discuss whether the non-competitive model of Nicaea has something to offer to our conversations about competing interests and entities.

Worship
One God

We meet in the name of God whose speech began the story of life
whose words brought form into being
and who ordered creation in harmony and goodness.

We meet in the purpose of Jesus whose life was the speech of God
whose words show the shape of his Kingdom
and who draws those who hear into its unfolding story.

We meet in the power of the Spirit
whose breath tamed the primordial chaos
whose tongue shapes the words of change
and who energises the ones who give them voice.

We meet in the name of the Triune God
the Source, the Sharer, and the Shaper,
Who was, and is, and will be as long
as the Story of Love is told.

COLLECT FOR CREATIONTIDE

Glorious God, the whole of creation proclaims your marvellous work: increase in us a capacity to wonder and delight in it, that heaven's praise may echo in our hearts and our lives be spent as good stewards of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

HYMN TO THE TRINITY

by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell
To the tune of Abbot's Leigh, Blaenwern, Hyfrydol, Ode to Joy, or Lux Eoi
A recording by the Choir of Holy Trinity Geneva is available on the diocesan website

Light of light, Love's radiant Glory,
Blessed Trinity adored!
Well of life, our shaping story,
Source of beauty, life outpoured!
As in heav'n the angels worship,
'Holy, Holy, Holy!' sing,
Let us now their praises echo,
And our lives in homage bring.

God the Father, first Beginning,
Fountainhead of life and grace,
Love eternal, all-creating,
Energising time and space,
Seen in all creation's beauty,
Fragile flowers and stars above,
Particles whose hidden mystr'y
Praise your all-creative love.

God the Son by Love begotten,
Loved from all eternity,
Life outpoured for our salvation,
Through whom all was brought to be,
Perfect image of the Father,
God from God, and Light from Light,
Healing through our human weakness,
For sin's blindness giving sight.

Holy and life-giving Spirit,
Bond of love, God's living Breath,
Presence which the Church inherits,
Raising us to life from death;
Drawing us to deep communion,
Kindling in our hearts desire -
Longing prayer for perfect union,
Tears of joy and tongues of fire!

Triune God we bring our praises,
Low in adoration fall,
Awesome Wonder that amazes
As our hearts now hear your call,
'Share in me the life of glory,
Lives transfigured by my Love!'
Saints on earth and saints in heaven,
In the Trinity above.

DISMISSAL

Tend the earth, care for God's good creation,
and bring forth the fruits of righteousness.
Go in the peace of Christ.
Thanks be to God.