

14th July 2019
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Pentecost 4
Fathers of the 4th Ec. Council

'You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.' [Matt.5:14]

Today we commemorate the fathers of the Fourth Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon near Constantinople in the year 451. The council fathers confirmed the teachings and dogma of the Nicene Creed that we recite in the Liturgy and clarified the Church's understanding of Christ Himself. This understanding is not only the doctrine and teaching of the Orthodox Church: it is also taught by Roman Catholicism and the mainstream Protestant denominations.

The Council is famous in history for what is called the Chalcedonian Definition. here is part of what it says about Christ:

*"...begotten before all ages of the Father **according to the Godhead**, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, **according to the Manhood**; one and the same Christ... **in two natures**... the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union... and concurring in **one Person and one Subsistence**, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as... the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.*

To paraphrase that as simply as I can: Christ is one being, a person with two natures; or, if you prefer, one someone, existing as two somethings. He is the ever-existing second person of the Trinity, therefore divine in nature, who became man, human by nature, yet remains the same one person: the particular man, Jesus of Nazareth and the only begotten Son of God are one and the same subsistence or being, the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

And yes, this is very important for us. Perhaps many in the western denominations of Christianity sit very lightly on all this now; perhaps they have causes, other battles, other claims upon their

attention and think of all this as of very little relevance in the modern world. Well, good luck to them with that! We, however, are the great assembly of the Orthodox: the clue is in the name: *right belief* and *right worship*.

Just as two weeks ago we celebrated the Faith, founded upon the Rock, the Tradition of the Apostles, so today we recognise in the work of the Fourth Council the clarification and establishment of Orthodox teaching; we stand on settled ground, a firm foundation. But like all settlements it was only arrived at through great struggle; with the battles of strong and ardent personalities; through the twists and turns of rivalries and conflicts, political realities and candid debate. The definition of Chalcedon did not satisfy all, and in aiming to forestall schism it wrought cracks and divisions elsewhere. You may wish to investigate all that and learn more for yourself. But it stands to this day and here we stand, to this day!

It might be objected that none of this really matters to us now; this is all just history, after all. Will this pay my mortgage? Will this cure my rheumatism? Will this find me a better job? Will it stop the pandemic of drug taking, stop knife-crime, improve the health care, sort out the education system and save the planet? No, of course not. So what on earth is the use of this religious dogma? None whatsoever, as I've told you often before. We, the Church, are not here to be useful, or popular, or to dispense worldly wisdom. We are working out our salvation in fear and trembling, walking circumspectly and redeeming the time. But that this matters to us, the Orthodox, is beyond dispute.

The Definition of Chalcedon makes Orthodox-Catholic Christianity perhaps the most complex and demanding Theology of all the religions on earth. There are those who will object that this is far from what they perceive as the simple religion of Jesus of Nazareth; that all we need is to return to the teaching of the Bible as our only guide; that the real Church is just the agglomeration of anyone who believes in Jesus' teachings: in short, Gnosticism! But consider that for a moment. Perhaps we might engage in what modern parlance calls a 'thought-experiment.' Imagine the

conflicting interpretations where every man is his own patriarch; away with the episcopate, the presbytery and the diaconate in Christ! The Rock is broken up into small stones and heresies are given free rein. As Paul says in the first letter to the Corinthians (14:8) *'For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?'* If there is no unity in the message, in the gospel, in the teaching, in the dogma, in the Creed, in the sacred ministry, then there is no message, nothing that can be held be Truth!

But think, now, of the mystery of faith, the treasure that we handle on earth. It has been ours since the days of the apostles. St John's first epistle speaks with these opening words:

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.' [1Jn.1:1-3]

Yes, there are indeed levels of understanding and all that theological language, that *God-talk* of hypostasis and substance, of person and nature and consubstantiality is, of course, challenging. But there are areas where my learning will only take me so far. My examined knowledge of French is as far as A-level and I can get by well enough and I can read the language fairly fluently, but if I get stuck I have to ask Fr Filip, or Presbyteria Annemeike or Gildas for help. So it is with us, the Orthodox faithful, that we assent to what is held within the Tradition of the Apostles as an act of faith, but we must still look to the pastors to guide us in all truth; just as when someone is ill, they may have some idea what is wrong but would necessarily trust that their doctor had been duly trained and can be clear in his diagnosis and treatment of disease.

Should the people fall into heresy, that can be corrected, but woe betide a parish where the pastors stumble, for the fish rots, as

they say, from the head downwards. There may be many controversies and arguments within the body of the Orthodox Church, but none, thanks be to God, concern dogma or disputations over the teachings of the ecumenical councils.

Without the right understanding of the person of Christ, there is no Christianity, only an idol of our own engraving. All that we do in Christ: receiving the Holy Gifts with preparation and thanksgiving, praying, fasting, repenting and confessing our sins, giving in charity, supporting our church, forgiving those who wrong us, striving against the passions, being sober and vigilant, watchful over the thoughts of our hearts; all that we do only makes sense in the light of the true knowledge of Christ, who is both God and Man and is the measure of our real humanity, calling us to theosis: becoming divine by grace. For if Christ is not both God and Man, then neither can we be, and there can be no salvation for us.

For all this we strive together in the Church which is a 'school for the Lord's service', as St Benedict of Nursia says in his rule; or as St John Chrysostom said, '*The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls.*' Coming to the true Christ, the Orthodox Christ, we have passed the first judgement: here we are taught; here we are healed. And lest we drift with these times, unless we want to be haunted by the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of this age, we have to cling to the Rock. Why? Because this doctrine of the fathers of the fourth council teaches us what it is to be truly human, and in this find the healing we call salvation. Standing on that truth we become a beacon for the those still in the dark. As the Lord said to His Disciples: '*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.*' [Matt.5:14]