**Athanasius of Alexandria**

*Defending the Faith*

Welcome to the fourth session of our Lent Course. This week we move on another 70 years or so from Cyprian to the early fourth century, and to one of the foremost theologians of the early Church, Athanasius. His name means literally ‘the Immortal’, and he was born around the year 298. He became embroiled in one of the fiercest theological debates of the early church. That might make you think he’ll be rather boring, because we tend these days not to be very interested in debates over theology. We can struggle to see the relevance for everyday life. But I hope that we’ll see that Athanasius’ passion was not for academic points of theological minutiae, but for the very heart of the Christian faith and for what makes the Gospel truly Good News.

But that does mean today we’re going to be getting into some deep theology. I’m going to do my very best to explain things clearly and simply, so we can get what the debate was all about and why it was so important, why in Athanasius’ view the views he was opposing robbed Christianity of its very heart.

**Life of Athanasius**

Athanasius grew up through what has become known as the Great Persecution, unleashed by the Emperor Diocletian, reaching its height in 303. It was the most targeted and brutal persecution of Christians that had yet been seen. Christian gatherings were prohibited, holy texts and church buildings were destroyed, and all Christian clergy were arrested and imprisoned. But just ten years later, another Emperor who’d recently extended his control over the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine, issued the Edict of Milan of 313, which for the first time officially granted freedom of worship to Christians. While there’s been much debate about the nature of Constantine’s own faith, he did increasingly favour and privilege Christians and Christianity, and passed a number of laws in line with Christian teaching, such as the banning of gladiatorial games and recognition of Sunday as a holiday. This all meant that in practice Christianity had almost overnight gone from being a persecuted minority to the more or less official religion of the Roman Empire.

So this was the world in which Athanasius was growing up. We know very little of his background, other than that he was born in Alexandria, the capital of the Roman province of Egypt, and one of the foremost cities of the Empire. With the great Library of Alexandria, it was a cultural and intellectual hub, the Oxford of the ancient world. While still a relatively young man, he was appointed by Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, as his assistant, and had him ordained deacon in 319, when he would have been only around 20 years old. It was around this same time, that a certain priest in Alexandria called Arius began to oppose the teaching of Bishop Alexander. Arius taught that Jesus was not truly God, and this led to what has become known as the Arian Controversy. It was a controversy that Athanasius would be at the forefront of for the rest of his life – especially after 328, when he was appointed Bishop of Alexandria following the death of Bishop Alexander.

He was fiery, with a sharp intellect, and on becoming bishop he effectively became the leader of those advocating for the doctrine of the Trinity, in opposition to Arius. He was a colourful character, and had a very colourful life. He was sent into exile no fewer than five times, as succeeding emperors came down on different sides of the debate.

Just to give you a sense of the man, his quick-wittedness, and the sort of life he lived, I want to give you a story from later in his life, during his fourth exile under the Emperor Julian. History has named Julian the ‘Apostate’, because he was the last pagan Emperor of Rome. He didn’t persecute Christians, but he did seek to re-establish paganism as the preferred religion in the Empire. Now Julian, of course, had no interest in the Christians’ theological debates, and he saw Athanasius as a trouble-maker and wanted rid of him. He sent him into exile, but then sent troops after him to execute him. Athanasius had boarded a boat and was heading up the Nile. The imperial troops were following in a much faster boat, and before long were gaining on Athanasius – the Roman equivalent of a Bond-style boat chase. And so Athanasius, quick-thinking, instructed that the boat be turned around. Everyone on board thinks he’s crazy – ‘what are you doing, you’re going to get caught!’ But they turn the boat around and soon they come alongside the imperial troops. ‘Have you seen Athanasius? Is he close by?’ they call out. And Athanasius himself calls back, ‘Yes, he is very close. Keep going!’ And off they go, while Athanasius sneaks back into Alexandria and off into hiding.

**Pre-Nicene Trinitarian Theology**

So that’s just to give you a flavour of Athanasius’ colourful life. Let’s turn now then to the theology itself of the Arian controversy that he was so involved in. But before we do, I want to backtrack a little, and to put Arius’ views into context, to see where the whole theology around the Trinity comes from.

And I want you to do some work to begin with. What passages of the Bible can you think of that speak of Jesus in some way as God? What problem do they create?

*Discussion*

So there are lots of passages that speak about Jesus as God, and indeed the practice from the very early days of the Church as far as we can tell was that Christians worshipped and prayed to Jesus as God. But the problem is that Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father, and spoke about him as someone else. Does that mean we have two gods? Well that can’t be right either, because Christianity was a Jewish religion, and at the heart of Jewish teaching is the *Shema*, the words from Deuteronomy 6: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one.’ So we have a commitment to God being One, but also Jesus being spoken of and treated as also God but different from the Father. How do we hold the two together? How do we say that God is both One, and yet Jesus (and the Holy Spirit) is also God?

In the century before Arius, there had been two attempts to resolve this tension, both of which were ultimately rejected as not satisfactory. One was adoptionism, which was advocated especially by someone called Paul of Samosata. Adoptionism states that only the Father is truly God, and Jesus was adopted as the Son of God, and given divine status, at his baptism. You know, the moment when the voice from heaven declares, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved’. So Jesus was not truly God, but was adopted as the Son of God and given divine status. A similar theology lives on today in Unitarianism. The problem with these views is that we’re left with a Jesus who is not divine, just an ordinary person who’s adopted or inspired by God, which doesn’t fit with the biblical witness to the deity of Christ. So adoptionism was rejected.

The other attempt that was rejected is what’s called modalism, which was particularly associated with someone called Sabellius. Modalism states that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are different modes, different forms of the one same God. So there are not three separate persons, but one God who sometimes wears the Father hat, sometimes the Son hat, sometimes the Spirit hat. One God who we see playing different roles. And so the problem with modalism is that it doesn’t do justice to the distinctions between the Father, the Son and the Spirit: we cannot really speak of the Father loving the Son, if they’re just one person playing different roles. So modalism was also rejected. But unfortunately, it’s a teaching that remains unintentionally quite popular still today: think of the common analogy for the Trinity of Water, Ice and Vapour: that’s modalism, one thing (H2O) existing in three different forms. In fact, every analogy of the Trinity is defective in some way, and we have to be very careful in using them, not to create false ideas of who God is.

**The Arian Controversy**

So modalism and adoptionism were two ways to try to tidy up the confusing relationship between God and Jesus which were both rejected. Which then brings us to Arius. When the Arian controversy broke out, Arius was a well-established priest in the church of Alexandria, probably in his late 50s. Very little of his own writings have survived, being either destroyed or simply not preserved by later generations who viewed them as heretical. So it can be hard to know precisely what he did say, and why he said it. But it seems likely that he was seeking to make Christianity more acceptable, more understandable to the Roman intellectual elite. After all, he was ministering in one of the great centres of learning in the ancient world: the Library of Alexandria was one of the largest libraries in the known world at the time. And what it seems Arius was trying to do was to speak about the Christian God using a philosophical understanding of God that would have been widely held at the time. So, probably in very similar ways to the rationalists of the Enlightenment, Arius was trying to make Christian theology more intellectually acceptable to the thinkers and philosophers of his day.

Arius’ basic position was to say that Jesus was not God, but was the foremost, the first of God’s creatures. The Father alone is God, and he created Jesus, his Word, and then through Jesus created everything else. This sort of theology lives on today: the Jehovah’s Witnesses also believe that Jesus is not God, but simply the foremost of God’s creation. And Arius was very successful at promoting this theology. He taught people little jingles to help embed his ideas. One of those jingles is one that Athanasius would go on to tear apart: ‘there was when the Son was not’ (it probably sounded catchier in Greek). In other words, because the Son was created by the Father, before he was created he was not, he didn’t exist. So, there was a time when the Son was not, when the Father was just by himself.

Now Arius got to this point by beginning with a contemporary philosophical understanding of God. In contemporary philosophy, God was understood as the being who was the origin of all things. Therefore God himself did not and could not have an origin. God was unoriginate. So far so good. We also believe that God is the Creator of all things, he doesn’t have an origin. But the problem was that Arius took this idea as fundamental to who God is, it was the premise from which he began in trying to understand God.

But beginning here meant that Arius then had to conclude that Jesus couldn’t be divine. For if God is unoriginate, then the Son cannot be God. Because a son, by definition has an origin, in a father (and mother). A son by definition is the son of someone else. It’s a relational, dependent term. A son is the son of someone; otherwise he wouldn’t be a son. So, if the Son has his origin in the Father, then it means that the Son cannot be God, because God doesn’t have an origin. Does that make sense? Because Arius begins from the premise that God doesn’t have an origin, the Son cannot be God, because the Son, by definition, has his origin in his Father. And so instead, Arius argued that the Son was created by the Father at the beginning of all time as the foremost of his Creation, but nonetheless he was still created, and so ‘there was [a time] when the Son was not’ and the Son is not truly God.

Let’s just take a pause here. As I said at the start, this can all sometimes feel like abstruse and academic theology, with little relevance to everyday life. But at the time it became a major debate, and not just among church leaders. Fifty, sixty years later Gregory of Nyssa, a bishop in what is today Turkey, would write that still then if you went to a shop, or a bakery, or a bathhouse, the attendants would be reciting Arian slogans. You’d have choirs going round the streets of major cities singing alternative theologies, and trying to out-sing the other. At the time it was a major debate that everyone was talking about. And the debates led to the creation of many of our creeds, which we recite week-by-week in church (and one of our Christmas carols too – do you know which one?). So the legacy is also very much still felt today. So let’s pause, and talk to someone near you and ask yourselves the question: why do you think this was (and still is) such a big deal? What was so wrong about Arius’ theology, and why? Do ask if anything is unclear that I could unpack further.

*Discussion*

**Athanasius and Orthodoxy**

So the key thing about Arius, is that he saw Jesus not as part of God, not as God himself, but as the first of God’s creations – the *foremost* of all God’s creatures, but still a creature and not God. This has huge implications for Christian theology and the Gospel, which was why Athanasius so passionately argued against him, and endured 5 exiles, defending and articulating the doctrine of the Trinity – one God, three Persons. I think there are four key implications of Arius’ teaching for the Gospel.

1. *A creature cannot truly reveal God*. A really important question is how can we know God. Not just know things about him, but actually know him. Many religious teachers down the ages have taught what they think about God. Some have claimed to have had a direct revelation from God. But Jesus claimed that in meeting him you were meeting God himself. ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ Jesus says. If you’ve seen me, he’s saying, you’ve seen God. But if Jesus were just a creature, such expressions are utter madness. Jesus could not say, ‘If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father’, unless he was God incarnate, God present with us in human form.

Athanasius wrote this wonderful book called *On the Incarnation*, all about the Word of God, Jesus, becoming flesh. And he writes this: ‘Men had turned from the contemplation of God above, and were looking for him in the opposite direction, down among created things and things of sense’ – that is, people had turned from the worship of God, to the worship of created things. ‘The Saviour of us all, the Word of God, in his great love took to himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way.’ So, people are already looking for God among created things, so in love God becomes a created thing himself. ‘He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things’ (i.e. in things you can sense by touch, taste, sight) ‘might apprehend the Father through the works which he, the Word of God, did in the body.’[[1]](#footnote-1) So because Jesus was God come in the flesh, in Jesus we truly meet God, we see what he’s like. We see his authority, his power, his love, his tenderness, his anger at injustice and so on. In Jesus we truly see God and what he’s like, indeed we meet God himself. But Arius’ Jesus, being just a creature, even the first of all God’s creatures, cannot really show us what God was like. Instead we’re left to come up with our own ideas about him, e.g. that his fundamental identity is the Unoriginate.

1. *A creature should not be worshipped*. From the beginning it had been the practice of Christians to worship and pray to Jesus. We see this even in the New Testament. Doubting Thomas, when he sees the risen Lord, exclaims ‘My Lord and my God’ (Jn. 20:27). The apostle Paul prays to the Father and the Lord Jesus: for example in 1 Thessalonians, he prays: ‘May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord (=Jesus?) make you increase and abound in love’. (1 Thess. 3:11, 12).

But the Scriptures are also very clear, that worship and prayer belong to God alone. As Athanasius himself argues (excuse old trans!): ‘Creature does not worship creature, but servant Lord, and creature God. Thus Peter the Apostle hinders Cornelius who would worship him, saying, ‘I myself also am a man (Acts 10:26).’ And an Angel, when John would worship him in the Apocalypse, hinders him, saying, ‘See thou do it not; for I am your fellow-servant, and of your brethren the Prophets, and of them that keep the sayings of this book: worship God (Revelation 22:9).’ Therefore to God alone appertains worship…’ And after describing some of the passages where Jesus is worshipped, he continues: ‘But he had not been thus worshipped, nor been thus spoken of, were He a creature merely. But now since He is not a creature, but the proper offspring of the Essence of that God who is worshipped, and His Son by nature, therefore He is worshipped and is believed to be God.’[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, because Jesus is himself God, and not a creature, therefore it is quite proper to worship him as such. By offering worship to Jesus, the Church was in practice treating Jesus as divine; and so to claim that Jesus were just a creature, would mean completely reshaping the Church’s established liturgy and worship.

1. *A creature cannot save*. The Bible teaches, and human experience attests, that all is far from well with the world. Romans 8 speaks of the whole creation ‘groaning’. We’re in a mess, and we need saving. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But Athanasius says if Jesus is a part of God’s creation, then he is in no position to help, because he too would be in need of saving. He writes ‘if He were creature, He too would be one of those who groan, and would need one who should bring adoption and deliverance to Himself as well as others.’

Furthermore, if we were originally made in God’s image, but that image was marred when we turned away from and disobeyed God, it’s only God himself who can restore us to his image. In the *Incarnation*, Athanasius asks ‘How could this [the renewing of God’s image in mankind] be done save by the coming of the very Image himself, our Saviour Jesus Christ? Men could not have done it, for they are only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, who could recreate man made after the Image.’ In other words, because our very nature as humans made in the image of God had been ruined by our sin and disobedience, what was required was nothing less than the Image itself (the Son of the Father) to take on human form and recreate humanity anew.

It was this argument on the issue of salvation that was Athanasius’ main argument against the Arians. His principle theological standpoint was that in Christ ‘God was made man that we might be made divine’. In his understanding, it was essential that Christ was both fully divine and fully human to make salvation of sinful mankind possible, to restore fallen humanity to the image of God, and to relationship with God. Arius’ theology rendered Jesus an ineffective agent of salvation. If Jesus is merely a creature, then he cannot save.

1. *God without the Son is not a Father*. We were saying before that the Son is by definition son of someone. Well the same is true of the Father. I cannot say that I’m a father, because I don’t have any children. Well, likewise, if there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Father was not a Father. The Father couldn’t be said to have been the Father when there wasn’t a Son, any more than I can be called a father, regardless of whether or not I do at some point have children. And so that means, that God fundamental identity is not Father. Rather he is, as the Arians called him, the Unoriginate – the one without cause or origin – that’s his key identity. But do you see how suddenly differently God appears if he’s termed Unoriginate? We may not all have had good fathers; some of our fathers may have been very far from good. But in its ideal form, the term father is a personal, relational term. The term unoriginate is empty of any personality or love. Athanasius remarks that Jesus taught us to pray not, ‘O God Unoriginate’, but the much more tender, ‘Our Father’, inviting us to share in his relationship of Sonship with the Father.

So the problem with the Arians is that they were trying to understand God simply from his works, that is he created things, and therefore he was the Creator, the First Cause. That is who God fundamentally is, the Unoriginate. But Athanasius argued that we need to begin instead with Jesus, who is the revelation of God. And if we begin with Jesus the Son, then God becomes fundamentally not the Unoriginate, but the Father. The one who was Father from all eternity, living in a relationship of love with his Son, and the Holy Spirit, and who created all things as an overflow of that love. It’s only a triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who can truly be said to be love, because love requires relationship. If we just had God Unoriginate all by himself from all eternity, he could love no-one but himself, and that would mean a very self-centred and unappealing God – not the God we see revealed in Jesus Christ.

So these four reasons are why the Trinity was not for Athanasius an abstruse doctrine for the academic theologians, but rather the very heart of the Gospel. In contrast to Arianism, orthodox Trinitarianism teaches that in Jesus we can truly know God, we can truly be saved from our sins, and most of all be brought into the Trinity’s relationship of love, adopted as sons and daughters of a loving Father.

Any questions?

**Council of Nicaea**

Over the years, there were times when Athanasius seemed to be the only real voice for Trinitarian orthodoxy, and at the low point he’s supposed to have said ‘If the whole world is against the truth, then Athanasius is against the world’ – which led to the Latin phrase, *Athanasius contra mundum*, Athanasius against the world. Convinced that a Jesus who was not divine could not save and could not bring us to the Father, he did not relent, despite all he faced, from continuing to contend for the heart of the Christian Gospel.

It's something of an irony, given all that he went through during his many years as bishop, that the controversy was supposed to have all been settled early on in his life, even before he became bishop. The Emperor Constantine, wanting to resolve the arguments once and for all, called the Council of Nicaea in 325, the first major council of church leaders from across the Roman Empire. They met in the town of Nicaea in Asia Minor, near to his royal palace. After many hours of vigorous debate, the Council produced an early form of what we now know as the Nicene Creed, an articulation of orthodox, Trinitarian theology. It’s the creed we recite in nearly every Communion service (it’s only the purple Advent & Lent books that use a different creed). And it was this creed that Athanasius was defending throughout his life – it was only in 381, just a few years after his death, that the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople reaffirmed it once more.

So as we draw to a close, let’s take a look through the Nicene Creed. Given all we’ve seen of the debates between Arius and Athanasius, can you see what parts of the Nicene creed have been influenced by those debates? What do you understand those sections to be meaning?

*Discussion.*

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

Each phrase here is carefully constructed to refute Arius’ theology:

The Son of God is ‘eternally begotten of the Father’: that is, there wasn’t a moment when the Father decided to beget the Son, to have a Son, rather from all eternity the Father and the Son existed together in relationship.

‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’ – all these phrases underline that yes, Jesus may have his origin as the Son in the Father, but he is just as much God as the Father is, ‘true God from true God’.

‘Begotten, not made’: Arius argued that Jesus was ‘made’ or ‘created’ by the Father; the word ‘beget’, which may be a bit old-fashioned today, nonetheless is the only word we really have to signify the relationship between a Father and a Son.

‘Of one Being with the Father’: a really crucial phrase, over which there was much argument in the following decades. ‘of one being’ translates a single Greek word *homoousios* – but others, wanting to find a compromise, tried to argue instead for *homoiousios* = ‘of like being’. But if Jesus is just ‘like God’, either he’s another God, and so we have two Gods, or he’s like in some other way and is not God.

And this is perhaps a good place to draw things to a close. It’s been said that that single iota, which caused so much debate and argument, was not theological hair-splitting but it signified the difference between a Jesus who saves and a Jesus who can’t. A Jesus who is the Divine Son of God, ‘who for us and for our salvation was made man’, and a Jesus who would have no power and ability to do anything to restore our fallen human nature. The difference between a Jesus who can offer us real hope, and a Jesus who can offer none at all. It is for this Gospel, this glorious Good News, that Athanasius, using his powerful intellect, passionately argued throughout his life. And that’s why we recite these words week after week, so that the Church may never again, as it did for a brief time in Athanasius’ life-time, lose sight of the Gospel of our Salvation. The Gospel of God made man, so that we may be restored to God.

***Collect for Trinity Sunday***:

Almighty and everlasting God,

you have given us your servants grace,

by the confession of a true faith,

to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity

and in the power of the divine majesty to worship the Unity:

keep us steadfast in this faith,

that we may evermore be defended from all adversities;

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,

who is alive and reigns with you,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

1. *On the Incarnation* §15 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Against the Arians* 2.23,24 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)