

For us and our salvation

The creed is easy to divide into sections. Our five addresses this Lent will do just that. But as I said last week, it is a mistake to think that those sections are entirely self-contained. Each part of the creed speaks of the one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We get ourselves into great difficulty if we think of the love of God in Christ as some sort of afterthought to the divine act of bringing something from nothing in creation.

The words “for us, and our salvation” in the Nicene Creed are words which introduce the doctrine of the incarnation, God’s gracious self-giving in identifying himself with humanity by becoming one of us. Now of course that act of God in becoming human was entirely for the benefit of the children he had created, ordinary people such as you and I. God has no need to do anything external to himself, but in love he chooses so to do. This is, however, much more than a statement about the selfless love of Jesus Christ. As the great Dominican teacher Herbert McCabe put it, the doctrine of the incarnation does not tell me something about Jesus; it tells me something about God.

The important point for us to grasp is that there is no God other than God as he has chosen to be, God for us and for our salvation. We are mistaken if we postulate a God of reason or imagination, and then map that preconception on to the love we encounter in Christ. Rather, that self-giving love is our doctrine of God, our understanding of how best we can think and talk about the one on whom we depend for every moment of our existence. The God who brings something from nothing in creation is the God who brings something from nothing in the life of humanity. What is empty and lifeless is the dominance of sin, the shrouded existence from which human beings seem unable to escape, the existence which chooses not the life of God, but the opposite of God, that which God does not create, the nothingness which is contrary to his will.

But human beings were made for something different; they were made to make the most of the love which God pours into and upon them. They were made to exist in loving relationship with God, to imitate the selfless love which is the life of the Trinity. Unable to do that for themselves, they are trapped in a cycle of self and wrongdoing, unless God himself frees them from it, unless God does for humanity what it cannot do alone, offers humanity perfectly in love. The incarnation is the acting out in a human life of the eternal, self-giving love of Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus Christ is the one who shows us what it is to

be divine, by showing us what it ought to be to be human, what it means to give oneself without condition and without reserve. What more can be offered than a perfect life of love?

In uniting himself, his life of self-offering, to the weak and sinful nature which you and I share, God has transformed it once and for all, has made it into something which it was not, something which is now enabled to participate in the divine life. This is what we are doing each time God unites our offering to his own perfect offering in the mystery of the Eucharist, and it is the presence of that offering, that intercession, that perfectly represented and finally glorified humanity which we celebrate in the act of Benediction. This is the God who has chosen to be God for us, for us and for our salvation.