

Maker of heaven and earth

What we call the Nicene creed is the outcome of two fourth century meetings, the “councils” of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381. A creed, a statement of belief, inevitably comes to serve as a kind of summary of doctrine, but we ought to think of the Christian creeds not so much as check-lists but as frameworks – they function as a series of markers and sign-posts to delineate the space within which the church is able to teach, and to put that teaching into practice.

The Nicene creed has a Trinitarian structure, and for that reason one could be forgiven for thinking that the subject of this evening’s homily, the divine creation, was the act of God the Father alone. Scripture however will soon remind us that the Spirit is at work in the Word of Creation, and that that Word, that divine outgoing, is none other than the Son of God himself, through whom all things were made, as the creed itself says, echoing the letter to the Hebrews.

My favourite Christian thinker and teacher is St Thomas Aquinas, and one of the reasons I find him so congenial is the patient clarity with which he so frequently reminds us that it is easier to say what we don’t

mean than what we do when we are discussing the infinite, eternal and unknowable God. So when it comes to creation, Aquinas reminds us that by God’s creating we don’t mean his starting everything off and then letting it take its course. That understanding is properly called Deism. The Christian doctrine of creation teaches the absolute dependence upon God of everything that is, at every point of its existence. In that sense, God is creating the world no less at this moment than at the moment we might call the big bang.

The reason why so many science versus religion debates are so misguided is that creation does not mean making the world, as a potter makes a vessel or a watchmaker fits together a time-piece. Creation means the bringing of something out of nothing. And genuine nothing is inconceivable. It does not mean empty space, it does not mean lack of matter, it means nothing. No thing. No laws of physics, no potential for energy, no pulse in the eternal mind, nothing whatsoever. And, by definition, nothing can explain such a creation. I can talk about something changing from one state into another, but I can make very little sense of something which comes from genuine nothing.

Once we have grasped this most important of ideas – the idea that we cannot grasp the concept of creation – we are far less likely to be

confused. The creed talks of God making heaven and earth to emphasise the universality of creation. There is nothing which is not created by God. The various scriptural stories speak powerfully to us of God calling order from chaos and shaping, in his wisdom, the world which we have come to know. But many other and later scriptural stories speak to us of the very same God and his very same ability to bring something from nothing, to bring life where there is none. Children spring from barren women, the wilderness becomes a fruitful garden, the lame leap like young deer and, finally, the dead are raised to life. This is the God of Jesus Christ, the Christian God whose eternal act of creation brings light from darkness and life from death.

This is the God whom we seek in Lent. The ability to create, to kindle the fire of the spirit in the nothingness of our hearts, is the sign that the God of Israel is the God of us all, the God who seeks us in grace and love, who calls us in worship and prayer, who turns us to set our eyes and our minds again on the road to Holy Week and Easter. That, after all, is the purpose of Lent. And if we walk that road as disciples, if we pray and study and love and learn, we will find that the God who meets us in the garden is the very same God of the fourth century creeds, the one who brings something from nothing by raising the dead to life. He is the maker of heaven and earth.