



Amsterdam Lectures 2011-12:

Eastern Orthodox Theology: a Personal Introduction

Lecture V: Who is Christ? The life of Christ; the Paschal mystery; the doctrine of Christology.

This is, I think, the most central lecture in this course, for in it we look at what we believe, as Orthodox Christians, about Christ. The whole question of what we know about Christ, and how we know it, has been made complicated – at least at an intellectual level – by now about three centuries of argument and scholarship in the West. The sources seem obvious – the four Gospels that we find in the New Testament – but modern Western scholarship, mostly Protestant, has made what seems obvious shadowy and ambiguous. Very simply, the argument has gone something like this. The four Gospels are not direct eye-witness accounts of the life of Christ. The literary relationships between the Gospels, and the kind of material we find in the Gospels, make it clear, it is argued, that we are dealing with an oral tradition that was not written down until several decades after the life of Christ. Even at the stage of writing down, it looks as if this material was used very freely. Mark's Gospel, it is claimed, is the earliest, and was used by the authors of both Matthew and Luke in rather different ways, who also supplemented the material from Mark with other material, some of which both authors used, and some of which seems to have been special to each of the Evangelists. The case of the fourth Gospel, the one attributed to St John, is different again: a difference that has long been recognized – Clement of Alexandria called it the 'spiritual Gospel'. There is a lot of argument as to how much John knew of the other, so-called Synoptic Gospels, but the idea that he

was independent of them looks less and less likely, in which case the differences – in chronology and the interpretation of events – need some explanation. Very quickly we seem to find ourselves confronted with a kind of complex palimpsest of traditions, raising difficult questions of authenticity. A further problem for Protestant scholarship is that the four Gospels have been revered as the Four Gospels because, in some way, the details of which are quite obscure to us, towards the end of the second century – a century and a half after the death of Christ – the Church set its seal on these Gospels, and rejected other texts as being inauthentic. The grounds of the Church's decision seems to have been 'apostolicity', meaning, at least, that the four Gospels could be traced back to apostles: Matthew and John were among the Twelve Apostles, and it was maintained that Mark had the authority of the Apostle Peter, and Luke the authority of the Apostle Paul (not, historically, one of the Twelve, but undoubtedly regarded as an apostle). Modern scholars have had difficulty in maintaining the authenticity of these attributions, and within Protestantism appeal to the authority of the Church seems to turn on its head the Reformation principle of the authority of Scripture over against the Church. So the authority of the four Gospels becomes unclear.

Where do we Orthodox stand in relation to this? Is there, indeed, an 'Orthodox' position? Isn't it simply a matter of scholarship?

I think there is an Orthodox position, though it is one we share with other Christians, not least the Roman Catholics, though it may be we find it easier to articulate than others. I would argue that there are two points we need to take into account, that are overlooked by the way the debate over the Gospels has been conducted by scholars. First of all – and suggested by part of my title – the question is not: Who *was* Christ? But: who *is* Christ? We are not asking about the life story and teaching of a dead man, we are asking about someone whom we believe to be alive today. We believe in the Resurrection. You might say – and some scholars certainly would – that this is putting the cart before the horse. The event of the Resurrection needs evidence, and yet I am saying that it is only in the light of the Resurrection that we can approach the evidence of the Gospels. But, in fact, this is a truism. Everyone accepts that the Gospels were written in the light of the Resurrection; nobody thinks that they present us with unvarnished facts on the basis of which we can make up our minds. It simply

is not the case, and no one really thinks that it is, that we can decide the truth of Christianity by sitting down and sorting out the historical evidence, and then making our own decision. It just isn't like that. The Gospels themselves, in fact, contain hints about this. Twice in St John's Gospel we are told that the writer of the Gospel, the beloved disciple (identified with John by a process of elimination), is the witness of these things, and we know that his witness is true. Witness to what? Essentially to the death and resurrection of Christ (see John 19:35, 21:14, cf. 20:31). The beloved disciple is presented as one who was close to Christ and can tell us about the one we believe in: his teaching and the truth of his death and resurrection. The idea that something is involved beyond our own assessment of the historical facts is there in the final scene in Matthew's Gospel: when the Lord appears after the resurrection to the eleven disciples, on a mountain, it is said that 'when they saw him they worshipped him; but some of them doubted' (Matt 28:17). John tells a similar story with his account of Thomas' doubts about the resurrection: it is the personal encounter with the Lord that convinces Thomas (John 20:24–9). Faith in the Resurrection is not about assessing some historical fact, it is about encountering the Risen Lord, One who, as risen, is alive.

The other point we need to take into account is this. What modern scholarship has made clear is that we cannot go behind the Gospels as authenticated by the Church to some historical documents, or other form of evidence, that give us the unvarnished facts. If we try to discount the faith in the Resurrection of Christ by the Christians who preserved these stories about Christ, and eventually put them together in the Gospels, then we shall find that we are discounting virtually everything: there is nothing left for us to make our own judgments on. That is a disaster to a certain kind of Protestant, and can lead to an understanding of faith as utterly paradoxical that would actually be compromised, if there were more historical evidence to support it: we find this kind of position in Kierkegaard, and later in the New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. But from another point of view it is scarcely a problem at all. What we are being told, in effect, is that the Gospels preserve the witness of the early Christians, and especially the Apostles, to faith in Christ, and his death and resurrection. It is only if we *mistrust* the apostles, that this becomes a problem. If we cannot accept the witness of the apostles, we have nowhere to go: but is that surprising? To be a Christian is not to be an individual who has made up his or her

own mind about the reliability of the Gospels; to be a Christian is to be part of the Church, Christ's body, and to find as we trust one another within that community, that we come to encounter Christ. That encounter with Christ can take many forms. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh encountered Christ through the experience of reading St Mark's Gospel and feeling that Christ was there with him, as he read. For others it is not so easy to put one's finger on any event like that, but nonetheless in the community of the Church we find that we know the love of Christ, and of his friends the Saints: we know this as a real experience of living persons. And if we can trust the community of faith in which we find ourselves, we can trace the lineaments of that trust through the life of the Church to the band of disciples that accompanied Christ in his lifetime, and were witnesses of his resurrection. It seems to me that modern biblical scholarship has only shown us the stark truth that Christianity finds its beginning in faith in the Resurrection: faith, not in the sense of a paradoxical commitment that reposes on nothing, but faith in the sense of trust in the community of faith that is the Church. If that is true, then it seems to me that it doesn't matter too much whether Matthew, for instance, was an apostle: the Gospel was attributed to him because the church felt it was fundamentally apostolic, and in some way Matthaean, maybe because some of the stories concerned him. It is, if you like, more the case that it was because the witness of that Gospel was felt genuinely apostolic that the Church was happy about its attribution to Matthew, not because Matthew actually wrote it, that made it apostolic. With those Gospels – the so-called apocryphal Gospels – that did not receive the Church's seal of approval, their claims to be by apostles such as Thomas or Peter were rejected, because their doctrine was not recognized as apostolic.

How then are we to read the witness of the Gospels – and of the New Testament, more broadly – to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ? What is abundantly clear, it seems to me, is that it is from the perspective of the Death and Resurrection of Christ that we are to read these works. The death of Christ is so important because, as we saw last time, it is death that has cast its pall over human life, and indeed the life of the cosmos. Death is the problem that needs to be answered: death that calls in question everything we try to achieve, death that seems to be the inevitable horizon of human life. No remedy for the human condition that falls short of death is of any use. The verses that we sing during Holy Week in the Orthodox Liturgy speak a great deal

about Christ's 'voluntary passion'. Every service between Palm Sunday evening and Holy Thursday ends with the priest's blessing which begins: 'May the Lord who is coming to his voluntary passion (τὸ ἐκούσιον πάθος)...' There is a kind of deliberate contradiction – or paradox – in that expression. For a *pathos* is essentially something that happens to us, that overwhelms us, that we suffer, whereas voluntary means something that we do. We don't decide to die: it is the ultimate *pathos*, something that happens to us. But not, we believe, in the case of Christ. Even in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is presented not as someone to whom things happen, but as one who stamps his own character on events; in the fourth Gospel it is explicit – 'no one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10:18) – or as we hear in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom – 'in the night in which he was given up, or rather gave himself up, for the life of the world'. And so in the case of his death: Christ does not succumb to death, but rather encounters death and overthrows it; he descends into the place of the dead, Hades or Hell, and liberates those who had been held there since Adam, beginning with Adam and Eve, as we see in the icon of the Resurrection, or the *Anastasis*. 'Love is as strong as death', we read in the Song of Songs (Cant 8:6), and here that observation takes on a new meaning: Christ's love for human kind is able to overcome death, for it does not succumb to death, but seeks it out.

This belief that Christ did not succumb to death, but overcame death – something manifest in the Resurrection, when he demonstrates that death has not taken him, but he has overthrown death – this belief is the fundamental Christian belief. Because it is death that Christ has overthrown, death that reduces all our efforts to nothing, Christ is shown to be beyond the reach of any powers that threaten us. So the Apostle Paul affirms: 'I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38–9).

A love more powerful than 'anything else in all creation': already Paul had probably drawn from that the conclusion that the one who had died on the Cross, the Lord Jesus Christ is one 'through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor 8:6). It is an amazing statement: that one who had died barely twenty years earlier was the

one through whom all things came into being. For the Apostle Paul it had to be true, because otherwise it would be impossible to explain how nothing in all creation could threaten the ‘love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’. The one who had died on the cross was evidently a man; but the nature of that death, and the consequences of that death, demonstrated that he transcended creation, and that he did because it was through him that everything had been created.

But there are other – more personal ways – in which the Lord of the Gospels was seen to be more than simply human. There is not time to pursue this now, but I want to explore briefly one of these ways. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is shown as a man of prayer. He rises early and prays (Mark 1:35); on one striking occasion, we are told that the Lord went up into a mountain to pray, while his disciples crossed Lake Gennesaret and got caught in a storm during the night; just before dawn the Lord appeared to his disciples on the water and dismissed the storm (Matt 14:23–33; Mark 46–52; John 6:15–21). Luke, in particular, mentions the Lord as praying at the time of his baptism (Luke 3:21), at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28). Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, and give them the Lord’s Prayer, the ‘Our Father’ (Matt 6:7–13; Luke 11:1–4). Finally, before his passion, the Lord prays in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:40–6). In drawing attention to the prayer of Christ, the Evangelists are drawing attention to his humanity, for prayer is how human beings relate to God. The human-ness of Christ is perhaps especially manifest in the prayer of the agony in Gethsemane: ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless not what I will, but what you will’ (Mark 14:36). (It is interesting, to note, in passing, how much Luke makes us see the parallel between the prayer of the agony, and the Lord’s prayer: addressing God as simply ‘Father’, as in the Lucan version of the ‘Our Father’, twice exhorting the disciples to prayer against entering temptation [the closing petition of Luke’s ‘Our Father’], and the echo of ‘Your will be done...’ [still a strongly attested reading in Luke’s version] in the Lord’s prayer in the Garden.) But even in the Gospel accounts, Jesus is manifest as more than human: not in the sense of super-human, but as, in some way, one to whom we relate as God. The most obvious places are the occasion in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus turns from prayer to his Father, and turns to – well, it is not exactly clear whom, and that may be the point – saying, ‘Come to me all who labour and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take your yoke on me and learn of

me, because I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matt 11:28), and the account of the Transfiguration, where the Lord appears transfigured in glory (Matt 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). The account of the Transfiguration – like the account of the Baptism of Christ, 'where [as we sing at Theophany] the worship of the Trinity was made manifest' – reveals the Lord declared to be the 'Son' of the Father. The idea that Jesus unites in himself sonship in two ways – as 'Son of man', understood by the Fathers to mean 'one among human sons', and 'Son of God', begotten by the Father – we have already encountered. It is adumbrated in both these passages, and developed in the fourth Gospel: there the Lord is the Son of the Father, sent into the world; here in the world, we can enfold our prayer in his, but at the same time, he is one who manifests the Father ('He who has seen me has seen the Father': John 14:9), and to whom the disciples (and first of all his own mother: John 2:5) turn in prayer, finally and openly in the Apostle Thomas' exclamation, 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). Jesus is then presented as the one to whom we pray – as God the Son, within the life of the Trinity – and as one in whose prayers ours can be enfolded – as man.

Out of this perception, there emerged the doctrine of Christ as one person in two perfect natures, divine and human. It is the realization of this doctrine, and the working out of its implications, that came to be the central preoccupation of the Ecumenical Councils of the Church: councils that are of enduring importance in the life of the Church. I want now briefly to trace this history, from the first to the eighth century. It is not exactly the *development* of a doctrine, to use the term popularized by Newman: that gives the impression of some kind of evolution, with the Church's faith changing and even getting better, as if we in the twenty-first century know the faith more deeply than St Paul, say. I prefer to talk in terms of realization, rather than development, a growing clarity, not deeper insights. The only growing in depth that matters is a growing in depth in our relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. I do not doubt the truth of Newman's words, 'In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often';¹ but they apply, it seems to me to our own development as persons, not to the Church as the Body of Christ. If there is a history of doctrine, it is (as one of my Greek pupils

¹ J.H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. The Edition of 1845, ed. J.M. Cameron (Harmondsworth, 1974), 100.

once pointed out to me) the history of heresy, which is constantly changing, not a history of the faith of the Church.

Put simply, the Church confesses about Christ that he is the Son of God become human, become a man, without ceasing to be God. The history of Christology is the history of the attempt to preserve that confession. Perhaps the first problem was to square the attribution of some kind of divinity to Christ with the monotheism of the Hebrew religion in the bosom of which Christianity was formed. Put very briefly, in the first century or so, Christians came to realize that what distinguished them from other Jews was their belief that the promised Messiah, or the Christ, had come; that the messianic age had dawned. But this messiah manifested his power on the Cross; he was no political champion of hopes of Israel, rather what he achieved was something much deeper, as we have seen, the overthrow of death and all the ways in which death has corrupted human life, and indeed the life of the world as a whole. Already one can see a revision of what divine power looks like – not coercion, but love – and the further entailment that the anointed one of the Jews, the Messiah, was the fulfilment of the hopes of all humanity: ‘a light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel’, in the words of Symeon, who carried the child Jesus in his arms when he was presented in the Temple (Luke 2:32). Ideas about the real meaning of divinity – of who or what God is – subverted the normal expectations of both Jews and Gentiles: love and faithfulness revealed the nature of God, not power and dominion. Nonetheless, the Hebrew tradition, and in this the Christian tradition followed it, was convinced that there was one God, not the pantheon of Mediterranean paganism. In some way, acknowledgment of Christ had to be made to fit with monotheism. In the end, Christians came to speak of Triad, or Trinity, that did not compromise the divine unity. Apart from those whose understanding of the unity of God was either abandoned or understood very elastically – some groups among those we now call ‘Gnostics’ – we find either a stress on the unity of God that saw Christ as no more than an exceptionally blessed human being, or an understanding of the Godhead as including a hidden, unknowable dimension, called the ‘Father’, as well as another dimension, through which God communicated with the world, without losing his hiddenness. It is this last notion that eventually became dominant in the third century: what scholars call logos-theology, the idea that God, as he communicates himself, does so as *logos*, a Greek word almost untranslatable that covers reason,

meaning, communication, something that in popularized Stoic thought made the cosmos precisely *kosmos*, that is, ordered, harmonious, beautiful (*kosmos* is the root from which the modern word ‘cosmetic’ is derived). What Christians claimed about Christ could be put in this way: that in Christ we encounter the meaning of the universe, or better, the one who gives meaning to the cosmos. The *logos* theology also recognized that glimpses of the truth, seeds of the *logos*, could be found in the philosophers of the classical past, especially Socrates and Plato, so that their insights could be incorporated into the Christian understanding of things. Such reflection on the *logos* found a lot of encouragement in the beginning of the fourth Gospel, with its proclamation that ‘In the beginning was the Word or *logos*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Everything came into being through him... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...’ (John 1:1–2, 14), though it is likely that John’s notion of the *Logos* had roots, less in Greek philosophy than in Jewish theology of the word, *memra*, as the sacred presence of God, uttered in the Temple.

The *logos*, as a concept, belonged both to God, as his expression, and to the cosmos, as its meaning. The next step in realization comes about the beginning of the fourth century, and provokes the first of those councils, later to be called ‘œcumenical’, that is, concerned with the whole inhabited world, *οἰκουμένη*, as the Romans, hubristically, referred to the Roman Empire. We have already reflected on the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing, and how this suggests a fundamental divide between the uncreated God and the created universe. The idea of creation out of nothing can be traced back, as we saw, to the second century, but its radical implications took time to be appreciated. For the radical entailment of the doctrine of creation out of nothing is that there is no middle ground between the uncreated and the created. What then about the *Logos*, the Word of God? Does the *Logos* belong with the uncreated God, as uncreated; with the created universe, as part of creation; or is it merely some kind of metaphor for the engagement between God and the universe? Too much had been invested in the notion of *Logos* for the last mentioned to be satisfactory. But if the *Logos* is uncreated, does that not mean that there are two uncreated beings..., two Gods? So argued a learned priest of the diocese of Egypt, one Areios. According to him, the Christian belief in one God could only be

safeguarded by saying that the *Logos* was created out of nothing, maybe in a special way – the first, through whom everything else was created – but nonetheless created, and created out of nothing. The Pope of Alexandria, Alexander, sharply disagreed with his priest, and excommunicated him. For Alexander, if the *Logos* is not truly God, and so uncreated, then the Incarnate *Logos*, the Word made flesh, was a purely created being, and could not be the presence of the grace and mercy of the uncreated God. Athanasios, Alexander’s young deacon, and later his successor, took up the struggle against Areios, not least in the decades after the death of Alexander. The controversy blew up in the early 320s (most likely) and came to the attention of Constantine shortly after he became sole emperor in 324, after the defeat of his one-time colleague and co-emperor, Licinius. To settle this unwelcome dispute he called a council in 325, eventually at the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor (possibly because of its equable climate). This council condemned Areios and produced a symbol of faith (called in the West a creed, after its initial word *credo*, I believe), which included the word *homoousios*, to characterize the relationship between the Logos, or the Son, as he was more commonly called now, and the Father: the use of *homoousios* meant there was unbroken continuity of being between the Father and the Son, everything the Father was the Son was, save for owing his being to him. We have already seen how this became the foundation stone of the doctrine of the Trinity, but it had profound implications for the way Christians were to come to think about Christ. Christ could no longer be thought of as God reaching out to human kind through his *logos*, which was an intermediary between God and man. In Christ the stark contrast between God and man was bridged by one who was both. The Son of God became the son of man; it becomes more common now to speak, less of the Logos, than of the Son, or sometimes in a frequently used formula: the ‘Word of God, and God’, that is, the ‘Word of God, [who is] God’.

But how could the uncreated God be juxtaposed immediately with created humanity? The first attempts to articulate this argued that God could not unite himself to a complete humanity, and that this was not necessary for Christ had only to be human enough for God to make contact with humans. The most famous theologian to think like this was a well-respected theologian, friend of Athanasios and his supporter in the fight against what they called Arianism, which did not end with the Council of Nicaea in 325, but lasted in one form or another for the next fifty years. His name was

Apollinaris, and he was bishop of Laodicea (not the city of the Apocalypse, but a coastal town in Syria). He maintained that Christ could not have a human soul, or at least not a human mind; there could not be two centres of activity in Christ – one divine, one human – for this would destroy the unity of Christ, nor was it necessary, for all that was needed in the Incarnation was to bring the power of the divine into contact with frail humanity. If Christ's human mind could make up its own mind, as it were, then our salvation would be jeopardized. This heresy, called 'Apollinarianism', was countered by various theologians, not least by St Gregory of Nazianzen, later called 'the Theologian', who argued that if the Word of God did not assume a human mind, then the human mind would not have been healed, but that it was precisely the human mind and will that stood in need of healing. As he put it: 'what has not been assumed has not been healed'. At a council held at Constantinople in 381, Apollinarianism was condemned as a heresy. Indeed, at that council an attempt was made to define the lineaments of Orthodox Christianity, and measures set up to see that this Orthodoxy was enforced throughout the Empire.

Although heretical, the basic intuition of Apollinarianism was not completely wrong. His idea that in Christ the Word of God became a human being and lived a human life, and that, as the Word made flesh, there was a union between God and man: this was how most Christians were coming to formulate their belief. But what kind of unity would be possible for such a being? For most Christians the response was along these lines: this is a mystery beyond our understanding, there are various analogies we can draw, but the truth escapes our comprehension. But there must be real unity. It is evident from the Gospels that the Lord was a single being, not two beings inhabiting the same skin. One way of putting this unity was to say that there was in Christ one centre of activity: whatever Christ did could be said to be what the Word who had assumed the humanity was doing, there was no one else there to be the subject of Christ's activity, and yet everything the Word did in Christ was done through the humanity of Christ, the Word as Christ did not operate independently.

There was, however, a group of theologians in Antioch who found this model unsatisfactory, and in interpreting the Gospel accounts of Christ wanted to distinguish between two 'persons', perhaps characters: some acts of Christ could be ascribed to the Word – his works of miracles, for instance; others had to be ascribed to the human

person in Christ – his being hungry and thirsty, and other manifestations of human need. The controversy became a conflict when one of the theologians from Antioch, Nestorios, was appointed to the increasingly important see of Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire, ‘New Rome’. The flashpoint was the title for the Virgin Mary of *Theotokos*, the one who gave birth to God. Cyril of Alexandria, who took up the struggle against Nestorios, maintained that to deny this title, or even qualify its use, amounted to a denial of the Incarnation, according to which the one to whom Mary gave birth was indeed God, God Incarnate, God with us, Emmanuel. At a council held in Ephesos, the third Œcumenical Council, in 431, Nestorios was condemned and eventually deposed. Those who supported him were called Nestorians. After the council many of them left the Roman Empire and settled among the Persians; later some became missionaries and took the Gospel as far as China. In 433 Cyril agreed a formula of union with the more moderate of Nestorios’ supporters, in which it was affirmed that Christ was to be understood to be *homoousios* with the Father in his divinity, as had been asserted since Nicaea, but also *homoousios* with us in his humanity. The Son, who was ‘one of the Trinity’, in an expression that became increasingly popular, in the Incarnation became truly one of us. How did Cyril and his supporters (in reality most Christians, at least in the east) understand the attribution to Christ of both divine qualities, such as working miracles, and human qualities, like hunger and thirst? Actually it was in principle very simple: it was precisely to bear our weaknesses and the damage done to humanity by our sinfulness that the Word took on flesh in the first place. If the Word made flesh did not bear the weaknesses and diminishments of the fallen human condition, but they were borne by some ‘human person’ alongside the Word, then the Incarnation would achieve nothing. It was precisely in his love for humanity, that the Word or Son of God assumed a human nature and lived a human life, and in this way overcame the havoc we had brought on ourselves, and offered us the hope of living the divine life, becoming deified.

The acceptance of Ephesos in accordance with the formula of union was not the end of the matter, however. After Cyril’s death in 444, controversy began again. Some Christians felt that the unity of Christ was being compromised by the way the formula of union was being interpreted, and felt furthermore that if the unity of Christ was compromised, then so was the hope of our salvation. The events surrounding

Chalcedon, the next œcumenical council held in 451, are complex, but the result was a conciliar Definition, or *oros*, in which it was affirmed that there is

one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being [*hypostasis*]...

The council of Chalcedon settled little; Christians in the East divided over whether they thought this Definition correctly expressed Cyril's teaching or, on the contrary, betrayed it. The schism produced by this council has lasted to the present day; the whole family of Eastern Churches, nowadays called the Oriental Orthodox Churches, continue to reject Chalcedon.

So far as the Orthodox Church of the Byzantine Empire was concerned, however, Chalcedon was a valid council, and further reflection on Christ and his nature took its guidelines from the Definition of the Council. In the sixth century attempts were made to clarify the nature of the unity found in Christ, or at least to avoid further misunderstanding. In particular, attempts were made to accommodate the conviction of those who had rejected Chalcedon that it was necessary to affirm that 'One of the Trinity suffered in the flesh': that the union of natures in Christ was so deep that suffering in some mysterious way entered into the Trinity itself, so that, whatever suffering we endure, we can be sure that this suffering has been in some way embraced by God Himself – a doctrine sometimes called 'theopaschism'. But it was 'too little, too late'; it did little to halt the growing schism in the East between the Orthodox and those the Orthodox called 'monophysites' (so-called because they believed in 'one nature in Christ'). The seventh century saw a serious political crisis for the Byzantine Empire in which it lost most of its Eastern provinces, where the monophysites were strongest, first to the Persians, and then, after a brief respite, to Islam – in the event, for ever. This provoked a further attempt to achieve union over the understanding of Christ that we need briefly to look at, as it involves the reflections of one of the greatest of Byzantine theologians, St Maximos the Confessor.

In probably the 620s, some theologians (including the Œcumenical Patriarch, Sergios) thought that agreement with the monophysites could be reached on the basis of Chalcedon by accepting that there was one divine person in Christ (the second person of the Trinity), in which were united the two natures, divine and human, but that, furthermore, there was only one activity – a divine-human, or *theandric*, activity – in Christ. Everything Christ did was both human and divine; it was impossible to separate out his activities in human and divine ones. In itself it was a brilliant suggestion, but it met with mistrust from those committed to Chalcedon; for one thing, it seemed to contradict the formula of union of 433. Further reflection followed and a refinement was suggested, according to which there was only one will in Christ, the divine will. It is not at all clear what was meant – whether Christ had no human will, or a quiescent one; but opposition to monothelitism was led by St Maximos the Confessor, and eventually triumphed at the sixth Œcumenical council, held at Constantinople in 680–1. For Maximos the problem with monothelitism was the same as the problem with Apollinarianism: Christ’s humanity would be defective. Furthermore it was the human will that had brought about the Fall, so the human will needed healing, and if Christ had no human will, then he could not heal it: Maximos quoted the remark of Gregory the Theologian’s – ‘what has not been assumed is not healed’.

That is a brief sketch of the gradual clarification of Orthodox belief about Christ. All the way through, the concern was to preserve the unity in Christ of the divine nature with the human nature: the divine nature of the person he was, and the human nature that the person of Christ had assumed. The dangers were seen to be: either the Godhead of Christ was diminished in some way to make it accessible to contact with the human (this was the case with Arianism, and also with some forms of Gnosticism, and indeed some forms of the *logos* theology), or the humanity of Christ was incomplete, to make room for the Godhead, as it were, or the human and divine were held apart and achieved no proper unity. The Orthodox Church found in the Definition of Chalcedon a way of holding to our conviction that in Christ we encounter the Son, the second person of the Trinity, ‘one of the Trinity’, assuming a human nature and living a human life. As we sing at Vespers on Feast of the Nativity:

Come, let us rejoice in the Lord as we tell of the present mystery. The middle wall of partition has been destroyed, the flaming sword turns back, the Cherubim withdraw from the tree of life; and I partake of the Paradise of delight, from which I was cast out through disobedience. The undeviating image of the Father, the stamp of his eternity, takes the form of a servant, and without suffering change comes out from the Mother who knew no wedlock; what he was he remains, being true God, and what he was not he assumes, becoming man for the love of mankind. To Him let us cry out: God, born of a Virgin, have mercy on us.