

Theologically speaking, today's reading from Philippians has played a central role in the development and articulation of how we understand who Jesus is through the centuries. In that reading, Paul describes Jesus as one

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.

By the beginning of the fourth century, perhaps the biggest argument in the Church had to do with whether Jesus was God, was created by God, or was, as the Church finally resolved it, fully human and fully divine. The Alexandrian Deacon Arius taught that Christ was not "of one substance of the Father" but rather a subsequent creation of God. The Orthodox view, as you know, was that the Christ which became incarnate in Jesus was best described as,

“God from God, Light from Light.
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.

... and that, far from being made by God, it was through him - through the Wisdom of God -- that all things were made.

The topic of whether the Christ was created or The Creator was so divisive that the Emperor Constantine called together an empire-wide Church Council at Nicea in the year 325 to resolve the issue. Curiously, both Constantine and his own bishop, Eusebius, were on the side of Arius. So it is a bit surprising - perhaps a “God-thing” - that the Council of Nicea, which gave us the first two parts of the Nicene-Constantinople-an Creed which we recite every Sunday -- rejected the Arian view supported by Emperor Constantine. (The last part of the Creed about the Holy Spirit and the Church were added in 381 at the later Council of Constantinople.)

The created or uncreated nature of Christ was a hot issue in the early 4th century. People got in fights over it. At the Council of Nicea in 325, legend has it that St. Nicholas got up in the middle of the debate, crossed the room, and smacked Arius hard across the face. (Yeah, baby, you better watch out! Santa Claus is comin’ to town!).

As you can imagine, the text we read this morning about the Christ pouring Himself out into human form -- the lowest human form, that of a servant -- was front and center in that great historical dispute. What was not front and center was what Paul was actually writing to the Philippians about, which is not about the nature of Christ, but about the nature of being a Christian. Jolly old Saint Nick may have been defending the Orthodox view of Christ; but, at least in this instance, it sure doesn't look like he made the connection between what he believed about Christ and how he should behave in accordance with those beliefs.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul is thought to have been quoting a hymn about the nature of Christ in order to remind them ***of who they themselves were called to be*** ... who we are called to be: Emptying out ourselves for the sake of others. Pouring ourselves out in love. Indeed, Paul begins this whole section with a hope and plea to the Philippians:

If then there is [in you] any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from

selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Apparently, Saint Nicholas didn't read the whole memo. Yes, Jesus was the human incarnation of God's Divine Wisdom, fully and eternally God as to his divine nature and fully human as to his physical being. But the whole reason why the eternal Logos poured Itself out of eternity and into human history was to show us how to be human. (Do not judge others, he said. Love your enemy, he said. Turn the other cheek, he said. He decidedly did not say we should punch people in the face when they understand things differently than we do.)

In today's gospel reading the chief priests and elders see Jesus doing all kinds of Godly works and, at the same time, undermining their own authority as religious leaders. They recently had a similar problem with John the Baptist. He was kind enough to get himself beheaded for criticizing King Herod's marriage to his former sister-in-law. But this Jesus fellow just won't let up. Because he challenges their authority with his miracles and their interpretations of scripture with his teaching, they want to see Jesus' papers.

“By what authority do you do these things,” they ask.

But Jesus knows exactly how to expose them. “Tell us who authorized John and I’ll tell you where my authority comes from.” Although they hated John for the same reason they hated Jesus - he challenged their authority - they also knew that if they publicly condemned John they’d be in hot water with the majority of folks who loved him. So they said, “We’ve got no idea.”

Jesus tells us over and over to do the right thing, to love one another, to be patient and forgiving and kind to one other ... not punch them in the nose. Paul put it this way to the Romans: “If it is possible, ***as far as it depends on you***, live at peace with everyone.”

That must, necessarily, include striving for peace with those with whom we disagree. In a few weeks’ time, Jesus is going to tell us that when we stand before the judgment seat of God, he is not going to judge us according to what we believe or understand. He’s going to judge us on whether we were kind to the outcast, responsive to the sufferings of others, and welcoming to strangers, people different from us. Because, as the parable we heard this morning teaches us, it’s not the one that hears and understands the word of God that is saved;

it's the one who *does* the word of God, the one who puts on the mind of Christ and, I will add, the heart of Christ, and makes it his or her own.