

Candlemas

2nd February 2025

'Nicene Creed III: Son of God / Mary (CCC 422-511)'

Malachi 3: *the Lord you are seeking will suddenly enter His Temple*

Ps 23: *Let Him enter, the King of glory!*

Heb 2: *He should in this way be completely like his brothers.*

Lk 2: 22–40: *a light to enlighten the pagans ...*

This feast-day of the 2nd February, *Candlemas* — the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple — gives us this glorious passage, a big chunk of Lk ch. 2, that we wouldn't otherwise hear on a Sunday. It's a brief return to the follow-up to Christmas. 40 days after the birth of a child, Jewish Law required a sacrificial ritual at the temple for the purification of the mother (hence the pair of turtledoves, the offering of poor families); and additionally, for a first-born son, his dedication to the Lord and 'redemption' by a further offering of 5 shekels. These ceremonies combine in a beautiful episode in the life of the young Jesus. To be cast back today into *Christmas mode*, as it were — the celebration of God-made-man — is fitting for us as we move on to *the next section of the Nicene Creed, the part about God the Son*. If you haven't picked up, yet, I'm spending a few weeks preaching a series of homilies on the Creed formulated by the Council of

Nicaea. That council of 318 bishops, utterly crucial to preserving the unity of the Catholic Church, met May–June 325, 1700 yrs ago. The article of the Creed that we are considering today includes specific Greek words & phrases agonized over by the Nicene fathers — it runs thus:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages: God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

The background to the Council of Nicaea, which coloured its proceedings and gave great urgency to them, was the need, seen by the Roman Emperor as much by as the bishops, to achieve theological unity in the face of the *Arian crisis*. Arius was a priest in the significant diocese of Alexandria, Egypt, who began to publish in around 318 various theological opinions about the origins of the Son of God which did not preserve His full divinity. He wasn't the only one offering these opinions, and some such teachings had been present for many decades, but it was

Arius who offered a more extreme interpretation, and brought things to a head. To put it simply, Arius felt he was representing better some lines of Scripture by asserting that the Son was not as fully divine as the Father: in particular that he was not co-eternal with God the Father but that He was a creature, the first of all God's creations — more of a 'demi-god,' with all sorts of special attributes of goodness and perfection, but not one with God in the strict sense. The famous maxim which came to sum up Arianism was their claim that ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, "There was once [a time] when He was not" — in other words, he suggested, the Father existed without the Son at some point in the past. Arianism quickly gained such a foothold in the east, and then the west, that the Emperor was extremely worried about its consequences for the spiritual (and indeed civic) unity of the Empire. At times it turned violent, and so the Emperor was insistent that the Council hammer out the details and reach a doctrinal conclusion. This awesome responsibility laid on their shoulders is what makes the First Council of Nicaea so ground-breaking in

Church history. The Emperor sat in on the Council sessions, to make sure that they kept at their deliberations. The outcome was the Creed that we know — or, at least, as tweaked some decades later by the First Council of Constantinople. The formulation of orthodox belief is expressed in a repetitive series of phrases that show an insistence on the oneness of Father and Son: "*begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father*" (original Nicene text). Of all that litany of theology, the most innovative phrase of the Nicene fathers was to state that the Son was ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ, "consubstantial with the Father," or "of one being with the Father." This word ὁμοούσιος that they newly employed in the Creed, and championed by St Athanasius, one of the most forthright of the Nicene fathers, became the touchstone of orthodoxy and the term that separated the Church's true faith from Arian heresy. It didn't solve the whole crisis overnight, by any means — the troubles were

to linger on for much of the rest of the 4th c., and amongst Germanic tribes even up to the 8th c. But it was certainly a turning point, providing an ‘anchor-point’ — the very purpose of a definitive Creed — for us to hold to, and trust for sure in the absolute divinity of the Son of God.

The Nicene Creed quickly continues with the Incarnation, when that divine Son enters His own Creation. Candlemas, today, as the continuation & culmination of Christmas, celebrates that very mystery: the human mother of the divine Son, Mary, along with His legal guardian, Joseph, take Him to the Temple that already is His home-on-earth as the promised Messiah. The venerable Simeon, and then aged Anna, rejoice exceedingly that “*the Lord has suddenly entered His Temple*” in the arms of His blessed Mother. We reflect on how the missions of the Son of God and Our Lady were interwoven for the salvation of the world. We’re at that point in the Creed where we profess: “*He came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.*” Mary is the only human being named in the Creed, you

notice, apart from Pontius Pilate. The *Catechism* explicitly says how the lives of Jesus and Mary are bound up:

487 What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ.

Since Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God and has always existed, as we saw — as truly God as the Father is God — so, when He was conceived within Our Lady’s womb, it was “by the power of the Holy Spirit” — no human father was involved: *God the Father is the father*; and Mary herself is truly His earthly Mother, giving Him the flesh He desired so as to enter visibly into the world. This is the ultimate need for male and female in our race, that God could enter into His creation: He could truly become man in the womb of a chosen woman, whilst His divinity could be known and assured by there being no human father. As an unborn child, as a baby, and a teenager or young adult, Jesus was at all times *true God, as well as true man*. He subjected Himself to physical human needs: to be hungry, to be tired, to sleep and to be tempted ... like unto us in all things but sin. Why would the living God, the all-powerful

God, do this? Why reduce Himself to this world, when He didn't need to? *It can only be understood as love.* He was willing to become man, so as to be one with us, teach us, lead us to His perfect homeland. This He could not do without entering our world in a visible fashion; this He did with the co-operation of a simple, poor, teenage girl, Mary of Nazareth, who said, "*I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to Thy word.*"

So, what of Our Lady? What an extraordinary calling she had, at such a young age. The Creed's mentioning her by name just shows her importance; and the *Catechism* has important paragraphs expounding the theology of Mary. We honour her as the 'Immaculate Conception,' asserting that Our Lady was sinless always, from the first moment of her conception by her parents, SS Joachim and Anne. She was conceived in the normal human way, by her parents, but by God's grace, she did not inherit that original sin that has affected/infected the rest of humanity since the Fall of our first parents. This singular privilege of her being a human being untainted by original

sin meant that she was always worthy, fitting and ready to be the Mother of Jesus, Mother of the Son of God. She was to give Him His flesh; she had to be sinless in order to have the all-holy Son of God in her womb. It is for this that we honour her so much, the greatest of all the saints, Jesus's most perfect disciple, our heavenly Mother — not a goddess, but *a person fully human*: perfect in God's sight.

These are wonderful reflections to be able to make at Candlemas, so that we truly understand the grandeur and the meaning of the whole Christmas mystery of the Incarnation. The Council of Nicaea was keen for the Church to convey the *whole truth of Jesus* — if He were anything less than fully God; if in His Incarnation He were also anything less than fully and sinlessly human, from a unique, fully human, sinless, Mother, then we would have been still in our sins, unsaved and, as it were, 'sold short.' How blessed it is that that text from 325AD we still recite today and every Sunday, to profess our noble, timeless and saving faith: the living God has come to us in person, and comes to us still, every day, by His grace.