



**Arianism:  
Was Jesus Really Divine?**

**Philippians 2:5-11**

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

January 22, 2023

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Last week we began our sermon series on heresy. Not because I am promoting heresy or seeking to turn you into heretics, but because sometimes, exploring what we **don't** believe helps us better understand what we **do** believe. It is important that we do this with a healthy degree of humility, though, because, as I mentioned last week, these theologians we're talking about throughout this series were devout Christians, folks who took their commitment to Jesus Christ and the church very seriously. They didn't set out to divide or weaken the church or grab power or status. They were deeply concerned about understanding God rightly, and worshiping God properly. It's just that at some point, they made a theological turn the church throughout the ages the Church has been unable to support. What was true last week will continue to be true — the distance between someone labeled a heretic of the faith and someone labeled a hero of the faith is sometimes astonishingly small.

When it comes to the debate about the divinity of Jesus Christ, that distance is actually measurable. It is minuscule, but it is measurable. It is exactly the size of one single iota. An English dictionary will tell you that *iota* means "infinitesimally small." A Greek dictionary will tell you that *iota* is what we translate as the letter *i*. A single vowel, a single syllable, drawn with a single line. When it comes to the divinity of Jesus Christ, the distance between orthodoxy and heresy is that small — but the implications are huge.

All throughout scripture, we have all sorts of references to God the father, Jesus the Son, and the Spirit. Language about the three persons of the Trinity, but nothing about the concept of the Trinity. The Bible never uses the word Trinity; theologians developed it to give language to the truth we see revealed time and time again in scripture. And some of the earliest debates about what would come to be called the Trinity and how the three persons of the Trinity relate to one another, started with a priest named Arius.<sup>1</sup>

Arius was well-educated and at the head of one of the leading church in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century. And Arius he loved the Lord, his God, with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. He loved his God and declared him to be unknowable, unchanging, and utterly transcendent, the creator of all

that ever was and is and ever will be. However, he loved his God so much, he found himself denying the divinity of the son of God.

God and Jesus could not be the same, he said, because if that was the case, the limitations that were placed upon Jesus when he became human would then, out of logical necessity, have to be placed upon God, as well. But we declare God to be without limit, Arius rightly said. And therefore, he wrongly concluded, God and Jesus are not the same. One must be greater, while the other, even if still great, is somewhat lesser than the original.

This brings us back to the one iota of distance. The letter *i* as the only thing standing between heresy and orthodoxy. It involves two concepts, represented by two words: *homoousios* and *homoiousios*. H-O-M-O-O-U-I-O-S and H-O-M-O-I-O-U-I-O-S. (There will be a spelling test later.) *Homoousios* means "same substance" while *homoiousios* means "similar substance." The Church Universal declared that God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son are of the same substance. Arius said no, that does not work, they are not of the same substance, they are of similar substance.

This was his train of thought: In the beginning was God and only God, and God created everything, absolutely everything, outside of God's own self. Which would mean God created Jesus. Which would mean Jesus is a creation, not a creator. And as a creation, not the creator, the Son is not to be elevated as the same level as God. It would be demeaning, and it would belittle the God we worship and serve. Now, Arius read his Bible. He knew of John 1, which declares, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." He understood that to mean that Jesus pre-existed before the rest of creation. That Jesus was already around before God created anything else, but that Jesus was still secondary to God, created by God.

For this reason, Arius still loved Jesus and indeed worshiped Jesus. He believed Jesus was the first and foremost of all created beings, the perfect example of God in human form, yet still not actually, fully God. They are of similar substance, Arius said, not the same substance. Jesus is still more similar to God than anyone else ever was or will be. Jesus is still the way in which we find salvation, because Jesus shows us the way to God. But Jesus is not God. After all, he said, when Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," surely he was not crying out to himself. And when he begged in the Garden of Gethsemane, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want," surely he was not begging himself.

What the Church said in response, though, was that while those passages pointed clearly to Jesus' humanity, they didn't deny Jesus' divinity. The Church said we can and must hold two things to be true at the same time — that Jesus was fully divine and fully human, and for Jesus to be fully divine, he must be of the very same substance as God.

The church did not deny the passages to which Arius clung. The church accepted them readily, but then also put them in relationship with others, including most especially a letter from the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi, an excerpt from which Lucy read earlier. There, we read from Paul himself, speaking of Jesus, "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

And then, "God gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The name above every other name is not actually "Jesus." The name of which Paul speaks is the sacred name of God, represented by four letters, but understood in the time of the Old Testament to be so holy, it should not be spoken aloud. God gave Jesus **that** name. God's own name, a God-only name. They are one and the same, revealed differently, but of the same substance.

This passage from Paul has long been called the Christ Hymn, universally understood to have been a piece of liturgy, words that a gathered community said or sang together during worship. And the Christ Hymn

does what all of our best hymns have always done — borrow words from the sacred texts upon which our faith is built. The Christ Hymn borrows from the prophet Isaiah in two distinct places. Isaiah 45 reads, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: To me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear.” And Isaiah 42 reads, “I am the Lord. That is my name. My glory I give to no other.” In the Christ Hymn, we find some of the strongest affirmation about who God is, some of the strongest, clearest language anywhere in the Old Testament — and that very language is then applied to the person of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee will bow in worship.

And in the end, worship itself a large part of why Arius and his way of thinking was eventually denied by the church. His opponents pointed out that he himself was deeply dedicated to the act of worship, and that as a Christian priest, he himself routinely led the people of God in worship of Jesus Christ. But to be Christian is to worship only one God. And if God and Jesus are not of the same substance, if God and Jesus are not both divine, then our worship of Jesus Christ the son of God becomes idol worship.

Sometimes, our theology directs our worship. Other times, our worship directs our theology.

And in the case of Arianism, our worship of the one, true God carried the day. At the Council of Nicea, Arius was declared a heretic, and the Nicene Creed was adopted — a creed that went to great lengths to specify the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. A creed was adopted — language that clarified theology; language that was developed, once again, for the practice of worship. A creed was adopted that did not seek to resolve the tension inherent in saying Jesus Christ is fully divine and also fully human. Because that is, in fact, the great mystery of our faith.

I mentioned last week that a lot of heresy emerges when faithful people try too hard to alleviate the tension that comes with being a person of faith. Arius is one such example. Next week, we’ll talk about folks who swung too hard in the other direction — clinging so strongly to Jesus’ divinity that they ultimately denied his humanity. In some ways, next week’s sermon will be a continuation of this week’s. Because the mystery of our faith says Jesus is both. At the very same time. It is the fundamental underpinning of our faith. And it does not make sense. You cannot rationalize your way into understanding it. You just, at some point, have to make a choice to believe it, or not.

Here is what I know about believing: it is always easier for me to believe the big things in community. Left to my own devices, it is too easy for me to get stuck in my head or consumed by my own abilities or convinced I really should be able to understand what no one else before has. But when we gather together, every week, in this place, when I am with all of you, and we are saying words that have been spoken for ages, and reading texts that whisper sacred truth, and singing words that are etched on our hearts, and trusting one another to hold the reality of our lives — when that happens, that is when I am able to believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is in room.

Paul knew that would happen. That’s why, when it came to the hardest things, to the genuinely incomprehensible things, he said, “Here. Here’s a hymn. Let’s sing.” And that’s why the Council of Nicea, when the divinity of Jesus Christ was under fire, they didn’t write a letter, or a treatise, or a resolution. They didn’t even write a sermon. They wrote liturgy, designed to be spoken together, words that they hoped and prayed would knit us together.

Let us use their words now. Let us rise, in body or in spirit, and together affirm our faith, using a portion of the Nicene Creed:

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,**

**begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.**  
**For us and for our salvation**  
**he came down from heaven,**  
**was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary**  
**and became truly human.**  
**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;**  
**he suffered death and was buried.**  
**On the third day he rose again**  
**in accordance with the Scriptures;**  
**he ascended into heaven**  
**and is seated at the right hand of the Father.**  
**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,**  
**and his kingdom will have no end.**

We have said what we believe. It is a mystery. A holy mystery we claim with joy and thanksgiving. So let us now be like Paul, who wasn't perfect, not by a long shot, but who said, when things were all but impossible to understand, "Hey, here's a hymn. Let's sing it together. Because singing will bring us home."

Here's a hymn. Hymn 366. *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*. Let's sing it together, and in singing, find even more of our faith.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: What It Matters What Christians Believe*, edited by Ben Quash and Michael Ward, served as a general resource for this sermon.