Class 6 Summary – Theopaschitism

What is Theopaschitism?

Theopaschitism is the heresy which asserts that the union of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ means that it is possible for the divine nature to suffer. It arose in the fifth century and is associated chiefly with Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch, a Monophysite (Believing Christ had only one nature), who died in 488 AD, and with John Maxentius, a Scythian monk, who in 519 AD defended the formula “one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh”. The teaching was rejected by the Patriarch of Constantinople and by Pope Hormisdas, who reigned from 515-523 AD.

Several centuries after Nestorianism had been condemned, it reappeared in the form of Adoptionism, a fresh attempt to separate and divide Christ’s humanity and divinity. And just as Nestorianism didn’t lie down and die, neither did Eutychianism. A fresh attempt to confuse and change Christ’s humanity and divinity occurred in the heresy of Theopaschitism, which is the belief that, by virtue of the inseparable and indivisible unity of Christ’s divine and human natures, it may properly be said that God suffered as God when Christ was crucified. This was a belief held in the 5th and 6th centuries, and is associated chiefly with the figures of Peter the Fuller, Patriarch of Antioch, and John Maxentius, a Scythian monk, and it’s a belief that even some modern day theologians embrace.

Impassibility is the key to this entire debate. By “impassible” I mean basically that God can’t be changed from without and that he can’t change himself from within, specifically that he can’t change or be changed from a better or worse state, because that change is what we call suffering.

To begin with I want to address the impression some people may have that God’s love and God’s impassibility are two contrary things, which need somehow to be held in tension. This is not so. God isn’t loving ***despite*** being impassible: he is loving ***because*** he is impassible. Remember our definition: the impassible God can’t be changed by anything outside him and can’t change himself from within. If “God is love”, that’s very good news.

The persons of the Trinity are essentially and completely constituted only in relation to one another. They subsist in these relationships and can’t be understood as having a reality outside them. When it comes to God, we should think of the persons of the Trinity more as if they were verbs than as if they were nouns. God the Father isn’t simply an individual who “possesses” fatherhood as one attribute among many, like *my* father does. The term Father, when applied to God the Father, means more that he is “fatherhood in action”, he is eternally fathering the Son in the Spirit. There was never a time when there was only the Father; the Father and his Spirit of Sonship are eternal attributes of the divine nature. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are so to speak, mutually dependent; they are reciprocally and eternally related.

And since the Father, Son and Spirit subsist in their mutual relations, it follows that these relations, being fully and perfectly enacted, can’t change or develop – not because they are static or inert or because they are somehow emotionally dead, but precisely for the opposite reason – they’re so full of life. Because they are fully enacting their relational role, the divine persons don’t have any relational potential which would need to be actualized in order to make them more relational, more who they are. They are utterly and completely dynamic and active as Father, Son and Spirit. That is why we can say that God ***is*** love and need not say that God is merely ***becoming*** love. God “cannot deny himself” and therefore he cannot become either less, or for that matter more, loving than he already is. He is impassible; he cannot change or be changed.