

Setting the ground

We're going to approach our theme in a way that, I hope, you will find both interesting and relevant.

The usual way to talk about the early Church and the Fathers is to discuss their history, their lives, the context or world in which they lived, the questions which challenged them - the things that happened.

I want to approach our theme with questions. Because the important thing to realise is that the questions that were asked then are no different from the questions we ask now.

The other important thing I think we need to put aside is the idea that, somehow, we are cleverer or more 'advanced' than they were. We are not. The only real difference between us and them is the spanning of the centuries; time in which questions have been asked and answers have been formulated. We build on the questions and answers of those who have come before us, so that - happily - we don't have to keep going round in circles, asking and answering the same questions again and again.

It's just the same as it is with science, or with archaeology, or any of the 'human' social sciences, like psychology: we move forward not because we are cleverer than our predecessors, or even that we have a 'better understanding' than them: we don't. What we have is the years between us and them, when questions have been asked and answers have been formulated whether by 'discovery' or by 'insight'.

To draw what is, perhaps, one important distinction between our study and that of the sciences, like physics or chemistry or biology: they have progressed because more things have been discovered - we actually now *know* things that were not known then.

The Church makes one BIG distinction between our exploration and that of the sciences: *we do not discover* any more - what we gain is INSIGHT into what has already been learned.

This may seem like a subtle point, but it is important: *EVERYTHING* that we can know has been revealed to us, not as 'facts', but as *someone* - Jesus. In the person of Jesus everything we can learn about who God is, about who Jesus himself was and is, and everything that we are and were created to be and are destined to be by God's Will - all of that is revealed in the person of Jesus, in *who Jesus is*.

In more formal language than we're going to be using, the whole of Christian theology and Christian anthropology is shown to us in the person of Jesus, in who Jesus is. And I say 'is' quite intentionally, because - as Christians - Jesus is not a 'was' for us: he is an 'is' for us, alive and present. If that is not the case then we are not Christians.

So the process which moves us from the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, forward through history, our growth in understanding, is not a process of discovery: it is a process of insight. And how does insight grow and develop? It does so through prayer and through reflection.

It also grows through facing challenges, which means real life, because it is real life which made these people, about whom we're going to hear, ask the questions that they asked. Just as it is real life that leads us to ask the questions that we ask, the questions to which we seek answers:

Is there a God?
What is God *like*?
Who was Jesus?
Was Jesus God?
Or was Jesus simply a human being?
What was the resurrection about which his disciples talked so much?
Does it matter now?
Is all this in the past or is it present?
Does it matter *to me*?

The Church has not always seemed encouraging of questions and many people prefer to believe in 'answers' - to take the answers that have been handed to us from the past and take them as definitive.

That's not a bad thing, but nor is it bad to ask the questions again and again generation upon generation.

Because by asking the questions - and I would suggest, at best, in prayer and reflection - we open the possibility of fresh insight: not the discovery of new things, but new insight into the fulness of what God reveals to us in Jesus - about God, about ourselves, about our world and our destiny.

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