

## **Christ Church Cathedral 26 July 2015 Trinity VIII**

What I am going to say to you should probably carry an ecclesiastical health warning, because it might affect your theological health. I want to speak about the Nicene Creed, which we repeat together at the Eucharist every Sunday. The original Nicene Creed was agreed at a council of about 250 bishops summoned by the Emperor Constantine at a town in western Turkey now called Iznik in May AD 325, and its purpose was to counter the heresy of a priest from Alexandria called Arius. The Creed we call the Nicene Creed was a developed version of that; it first appeared at a Council in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 381 – they met in a building which still stands – and it was approved 70 years later by the church at the Council of Chalcedon (just across the Bosphorus from Istanbul). Today it is perhaps hard to realise how much of our Christianity was developed and formalised in Turkey, which is now a very Islamic country.

The Nicene Creed isn't our only Creed. There was an old Roman Creed, probably deriving from Spain or France in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, which became the basis for the so-called Apostles' Creed, which we use at Mattins and Evensong, and there was the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 which condemned the heresies of Eutyches and Nestorius, and there was the Athanasian Creed from southern France about 400 AD, which you will find in our old Book of Common Prayer. This creed expounded the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, and is notorious for its insistence that our salvation depends on believing the theology this creed expresses.

These Creeds are often called ‘confessions of faith’, and that is because their origin lies in the questions put by the bishop to early Christian converts at their baptism. Two or three generations after Jesus, St Matthew’s Gospel (28.19) makes Jesus tell his disciples to ‘make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’; so the three questions the bishops then asked were, ‘Do you believe in God?’, ‘Do you believe in Jesus Christ?’, and ‘Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?’ You may have heard the same questions put to baptismal candidates in this cathedral. And if you look at the Nicene Creed on our service sheet, you will see that it falls into three sections, relating to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with some extra clauses at the end relating to the church, to baptism, and to the life of the world to come.

So far so good, and simple. Over the next few centuries those questions were expanded, and further details about God, and especially about Jesus, were built into the creeds. St Paul a generation after Jesus has a passage which sounds like a piece of the creed: ‘I delivered to you what I also received: that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures; that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, that he appeared’ to various people, including Paul, and most of that appears, as you will recognise, in our Creed to this day. What makes our creeds difficult is that, while their original purpose was to instruct converts what their basic beliefs were, and to give them the words in which to profess those beliefs, in the fourth century those creeds became vehicles for countering those versions of the faith which the church thought wrong and called ‘heresies’. All the difficult language in

our Nicene Creed arises from the fourth-century attempt to put down a heretic called Arius and his successors, and the put-down was expressed in 4<sup>th</sup>-century theological terms which are foreign to our own understanding of the world and creation. So in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are relying for the formal, official expression of our faith on a document which arose partly out of the early church's baptismal practice and partly out of a 4<sup>th</sup>-century religious controversy.

The church fathers started their thinking from their idea of God as unchangeable, detached from the world, and from the idea that Jesus could not be a saviour and could not save us unless he was God. So they put into the Creed the words 'for our salvation he came down from heaven'. To be divine, Jesus had to be eternal along with the Father, and here the Bible helped (though didn't quite say Jesus was eternal) because it called Jesus the image of the invisible God, *first born of all creation*, (Col.1.15), so the Creed says 'begotten of the Father before all worlds'. But God was one unchangeable being; how could the man Jesus relate to him in such a way as to preserve the unchangeable unity of God? The priest Arius took a simple historical view and said that Jesus was a subordinate, historical figure; 'there was a time when he was not'; 'the son of God was created'. This shocked the church; how could a created human figure like us save us? So they put into the Nicene Creed that second paragraph and described Jesus as 'the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father'. That emphasises that Jesus was not a created person like us; he was part of the Creator's very being (the Greek word is the famous *homoousios*). BUT others said, Wait! Jesus was a

real, distinct human being, so they built into the Creed the words ‘he was incarnate’ – was made flesh – ‘and was made man.’ The theological row continued; one side argued that Jesus was a unity, the pre-existent divine being who took flesh on him and was born as a man; the other side said, No, he was one being certainly, but in two parallel natures, divine and human, each with its own proper attributes; you couldn’t deny to Jesus a proper human mind or the divine ability to save us. Both sides were trying to square a circle: Jesus had to be divine in order to save us; but he had to suffer on the cross, he had to be fully human, or the suffering wouldn’t be real.

Now all that has affected the language of our Nicene Creed, its words throughout can be explained only by reference to that 4<sup>th</sup>-century debate. This is why there is a full paragraph about the Holy Ghost, which is said to proceed from the Father (that is, originate from the being of the Father) and together with the Father and Son to be worshipped and glorified. Later on, to emphasis the internal relationships of the Trinity, the Roman church added the famous words ‘*Filioque*’ – the Spirit proceeds from the Father AND the Son – to the Creed, words rejected by the Eastern churches and still a cause of division between Catholic and Orthodox Christians to this day.

My apologies for throwing all that complicated theology at you on a Sunday in the holiday season, when you hoped that the preacher was also in holiday mode. But it matters, because the Nicene Creed is the only creed accepted, agreed and shared by the major Christian churches – but that was over a millennium and a half ago, and I think it fair to say that we no longer see Jesus, or God, or salvation in exactly those

terms today. Today theologians start with the factual humanity of Jesus, and then ask what the gospel writers meant by giving him Old Testament titles like 'Son of Man' and 'Son of God'. And we should notice that the human Jesus of the Gospels does not go round proposing creedal statements for his followers to sign. When asked about the fundamentals of religion by a lawyer, he didn't propose a statement of belief but got the lawyer to answer for himself, which he did: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' It was the early church that developed the creeds in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries as a means of formalising belief and controlling the boundaries of the church – only those who ascribed to the formularies at baptism could be counted as proper Christians. Very convenient; but is that what Christianity is really about? One wonders.

One last thought; I was asked in the crypt a few months ago if I could advise a young person away from home, in a foreign land, how to maintain faith in a difficult age and context. I said, I hope rightly, that she should hang on to two things: first, stay with the community of Christ by attending the eucharist weekly as far as possible, even if you can't take everything you hear; and secondly, stick with the Lord's Prayer, especially 'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us', for that is the essence of the Gospel, creed or no creed.

Amen.

