

Festival Evensong – 1,700th Anniversary of the Nicene Creed

The Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

There remains an enduring interest in things which are regarded as ancient. Digging into the past, raises curiosities into the lives of people who were as human as we are, yet knew a society and a set of beliefs and values that would seem to us now as barely recognisable. Time capsules of historical evidence give rise to imaginations and fantasies. Shapes emerge from the ground or are found in sealed caves. Artifacts are unearthed that tell us only that someone somewhere made this, painted this, or wrote this. What world did they know? How did they understand the big questions of origin, life and purpose?

Modern society is amplified in so many dimensions that it creates for itself a wall of noise, information and misinformation that when we look away to more primitive times, we find a nature and a humanity that is appealing. **The past is always a much more comfortable and peaceful place to go; conversely the future sometimes feels more like a place of fear.** Imagine the singular focus that was required to build Stonehenge, or the pyramids, or to walk the hidden streets of Rome, or the temples of the Incas.

What shall we call these times in which we live? Modern, post-modern or post-truth? Truth and reality are now treated as mere tactical concepts that subjectively bend to our will, or rather I should say to the benefit of those who seek to deploy truth. I was a young person once, and you were too! What established truths did you have in the 1960s, 70s and 80s? I'm sure I can recall a much clearer binary between good and evil, that could be seen as those we defeated, or those on the other side of the Iron Curtain? Now we seem to easily turn against each other, usually on social media. Did we not once take unquestioned comfort in the natural world, a beautiful greenness that was there to be seen more in awe and splendour than as a political movement. Did you ever have to think about gender as a spectrum? **What would you say is unquestionable truth, now?**

Looking into the past is a search for pre-modern values for a post-modern world. **Please give me something to live on, something which is survivable!** What remains of the collective wisdom and learning from past times, still to guide us now? Well, there are such things.

It has been 1,700 years since the formation of the Nicene Creed in the year 325. It is a most ancient and elementary text which the past and the future cannot change.

When Christians talk about the orthodoxy or doctrine, this is what they mean. The creed has become a byword for a declared faith, that asserts belief in any place it is said.

The Nicene is one of three orthodox creeds which are used by Christians worldwide – the others being the Athanasian Creed and the Apostles Creed. **A creed is a test and statement of faith which, with only very minor exceptions, is a point of unity between all of the major denominations of the Christian world.** It forms part of what we call our liturgy, literally *the words of worship*. Billions of Christians say it weekly, across millions of churches. Perhaps with the exception of the Lord's Prayer, the creed is the most recited text of all time.

Driven by the compelling stories of Jesus's life in the gospels, and by God's Holy Spirit, the church grew in all directions and across all of society, for all time. Much of that was seen in the Roman Empire, although even in these early centuries the Christian faith had spread well-beyond imperial borders to the east, towards Asia and down south into Africa. What might have been like another 'mystery religion', became mainstream for the known world. **Wherever you happened to go, the creed was the checklist that Christ was in that place, in his church and his Kingdom.** Christians believe that amongst all the power games and tumult of human history, the survival of the Christian faith is assured because it is God's church – the God of all time and creation, who was, who is, and who is to come, the Almighty. We do not seek to define God. Rather the creed is a summation of the most important things God has revealed to us about himself.

In the year 306 Flavius Valerius Constantinus, was hailed as an emperor in York, into what was a complicated and divided situation of rulers at that time. There might have been four or five emperors across the empire in those days. Over his 29-year rule, he would battle to unite the empire under his rule alone, which would eventually earn him the popular title of Constantine the Great.

It was during his reign, that Constantine would find reason to call upon God's providence and protection in what was a fractious situation only solvable by battle.

It is said that his mother Helena was a Christian, and it was she who converted the young Constantine away from common paganism towards Christ.

When marching upon Rome with his army in 312, on the eve of a decisive battle at Milvian Bridge, Constantine saw the vision of a cross in the sky, accompanied by the words of God that *'in this sign you shall conquer.'* That was taken as a sure sign of divine presence, and in that faith, Constantine would prevail with his life and empire owed to God. Within a year he would preside over a declaration that is since remembered as the Edict of Milan. That edict granted religious liberty to the Christians, after what had been many years of persecution. **Such was the spread of Christianity, which only ever flourished under persecution, that edict was a decision for peace and stability.** Later, by 380, the Christian faith would become the de facto religion across all of the Roman Empire.

As it has so often been the case in history, the very wide spread and reach of the Church also gave rise to a wide spread of theological understanding. These were the big questions about how Christianity worked. In the education of the day, to know anything was to be able to say so in a way that made some sense in **the whole of time and creation.** It's what we now call scientific thinking. But the academy, as it was then, educated people through such disciplines as philosophy, rhetoric, logic and mathematics. Think of Plato, Aristotle, Euclid or Pythagoras. The Christian faith was not immune to learned examination, for its own internal understanding. **The Christian faith has never been incompatible with knowledge and truth.**

Since the very first church, there had been disunity over key parts of the faith, most especially how Jesus Christ related to God - who is a divine father to Jesus on the one hand, and to all other people (as humans) on the other. **In our faith we find easy to claim such incredible things like: 'God sent his son Jesus Christ to die for our sin, that we might be forgiven and inherit eternal life.'** That is quite a

statement to make, when you think about it. In the philosophical thinking of antiquity, how could such cosmic purpose and action that be understood or make any sense? What was claimed for Christ was not universally understood as rational or believable by some. So different groups claimed orthodoxy according to different formulas of belief, whilst accusing others of being heretics. There was division. It would stay this way for over two centuries, up until the time of Constantine.

Contained in the claims of Christianity, drawing from all scripture, tradition and history, there were many possible understandings and misunderstanding in doctrine and theology:

Is there one God or many Gods? So what then is the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit? How does that continue or contradict the Jewish assertion of the one Almighty God, against the polytheism of the pagans?

Was Christ created at will, like any Father and Son? Is Christ therefore subordinate to God? Does that mean Christ is not fully God, and therefore not applicable in his life, death resurrection to all of creation?

Was Christ human flesh or just a spirit? Was he adopted by God, like a prophet? So is his not actually his own flesh and blood then? Not God's son?

Or how can Christ be human, yet sinless? How can the corruption of flesh exist alongside the perfection of divinity, yet in the same person?

Did Jesus rise in flesh or only as spirit? Can our flesh rise again in the resurrection?

These were the big questions – just try answering any of them!

Orthodox doctrine, as we call it, has to learn from Scripture, Reason and the Tradition of what we call truth. The creed was aimed to produce universal agreement but can never claim universal

understanding. There must be room for the mystery of faith, for the unknowable mind of God.

So, do any of these doctrinal concerns matter anymore? Yes, they do because the Christian faith is reasonable and rational, and it has influenced the world. The church has responsibility for that. The Christian faith is not a set of ancient myths and stories set to drama, like the Greek Olympus of Virgil. The Christian faith remains active because God is active. This man Jesus Christ lived in history and made, in clear sight, such claims for his origin and purpose. All of this was backed-up by his actions and the conduct of his life – both miraculous and ordinary – both as God and man. That God and people can know each other is the unsaid basis for it all.

We are seeing in our own times a sickness that is like a return to the times before the Nicene creed – a time of many creeds, many truths, many theories, and all claiming exclusivity, but producing division. **The current new appeals to the Christian faith, seen increasingly in the younger generations of today, have become so because in the absence of anything solid people will return to that which has proven truthful and enduring, and the Christian faith in the Nicene Creed has no parallels in history to that claim.**

And yet the creed is not exact, not exhaustive, and not easily understandable. **In relation to it, we must have faith, and in result of it we shall find our faith confirmed and increased.** The Nicene creed does not stand the test of precise knowledge, but it does define the boundary of human knowledge and our arrogance to claim it. This is the most we can know about God, and probably the most we should ever try to know about God.

The Nicene Creed - say it as often as you can, and God will be with you as you do. Amen