

February 22nd, 2026

10.30am Holy Communion All Saints Oakham

The Nicene Creed 1

The creeds – what , why and when?

What are creeds?

- Creeds are statements of the belief of the church – the Latin *credo* means “to put one’s faith in somebody or something”.
- The creeds are focussed on the big issues – Trinity, Nature of God, Jesus and Holy Spirit
- They don’t address what can seem very important contemporary issues at all.
- Creeds create boundaries to what can be described as authentic Christianity – which is very much against the spirit of age.

Why do we have creeds?

- Creeds were formulated through the early church trying to make sense of what they knew about Jesus – through the apostles witness, emerging scriptures, and their own experience of worship.
- In the early Christian centuries, Christians were trying to communicate those truths to a wide range of contexts and societies. The core Christian message quickly evolved, but there were many different ways of expressing it Some of these ways, pursued with good intentions, were eventually found to undermine the message itself, particularly with regard to who Jesus was and the nature of God, and were sidelined. These early Heresies – although that has unfortunate connotations – were really ways of describing the faith that were ultimately shown to be destructive.

When were the creeds written?

- Disagreements over doctrine came to be of huge importance after the conversion of Constantine, when Christianity became religion of the Roman Empire as splits within the church could damage the social fabric of the entire empire
- In the early 4th century , Arius, priest from Alexandria, gained a large following for his views on Jesus – that he, like us, was created by God, and although he was on a higher spiritual level than us, and died and rose again, he was not God – but an exalted prophet. This made lots of sense to the Roman intellectual community at that time, and wasn’t promulgated with the desire to destroy Christianity but to make it intelligible to others.
- But it was clearly sharply distinct from the emerging orthodoxy and opposition to Arius was led by Athanasius. Constantine called the council of Nicaea in Turkey to come to a common view. He stated he had no preference, but wanted the church to take one road for the good of the Empire.

- The council drew together about 300 bishops from across the empire (mainly from the east), lasted 3 months, and eventually came down in favour of orthodoxy (Athanasius' position) by a very large majority and the first version of what we call the Nicene Creed resulted. This was not finalised till another council in Constantinople in 381.

A Trinity of creeds

- As well as the Nicene Creed there are two others in use.
- The Apostles Creed was derived from statements of belief from the Roman church in the 2nd century, and was formalised in the 5th. It is shorter and more direct than the Nicene Creed and is used in Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.
- The Athanasian creed was formulated rather later and has nothing to do with Athanasius at all. It is similar in some respects to the Nicene Creed, but much longer and contains anathemas as well as creedal statements
- It contains some memorable phrases. *But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternal but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible. And one might add one creed incomprehensible.*

The Nicene Creed line by line

*We believe
in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.
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.*

Basis of creed

- The creed is based on diverse passages of scripture. In the first part of the creed the two basic ones of relevance are from the start of Genesis, and the start of John's gospel.

We believe

- The creed is a corporate act of belief. As the belief of the church it can thus be said by all even if we have individual doubts as to part of it.

in one God, the Father, the Almighty.

- States the oneness of God, but introduces the Trinitarian Theme. Such a statement was very important in a polytheist society

- The oneness of God derives from the Old Testament witness “*Hear O Israel, The Lord our God is one God!*” (Deuteronomy 6.4)
- The fatherhood of God is again found throughout scripture – the Father of the world (Deuteronomy 32.6), all humanity (Genesis 1.26-27), the nation of Israel and their kings (Exodus 4.22-23, Psalm 2.7), the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 1.14, 5.1618) , God the Father of all who believe (Galatians 4.6).
- Almighty is a translation of the Greek *pantokrator* and the Latin *omnipotens* – and describes God as creator, sustainer, ruler and judge (Job 33.4, Revelation 15.3). The word is not liked by many – it has many bad connotations of power and authority for some – but is a way of describing the nature of God, as beyond all we can conceive.

maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

- In Genesis 1 we read. *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*
- The creed asserts both that God made all that exists, and his separateness from it. In addition it asserts that creation is both seen and unseen or in other words, earth and heaven. Both the physical and spiritual were created by God.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,

- Jesus was recognised in worship from the Apostles time as Lord and Master, and here is referred to as the Son – again echoing biblical texts (not least Jesus’s own words) on which the doctrine of the Trinity was built.

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;

- The first phrase is an important and key statement. Jesus was begotten and not made, and has been part of the Godhead from all eternity, of the same being (or substance). He is here identified here as God, as the Light that is within God, as the True God, which echoes the words of John 1. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

through him all things were made.

- The creed asserts that Jesus was at the beginning of Creation. Again from John 1. *He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*
- And from Colossians 1. *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together*

Boundaries

- These lines from the creed set boundaries to authentic Christianity. The major one is the formulation of Trinitarian belief. This excludes some churches who refer to themselves as Christian.
- Another fundamental boundary is that Jesus as God. O quote from C S Lewis *“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*
- The boundaries set by the creed act as warnings. For example the modern Christian environmental movement is much to be welcomed, and connects the church with needs of world and with the environmental concerns of many of many. But recently in in Church Times we read *“Panentheistic beliefs are present among Christian climate advocates and activists, new research suggests. Survey respondents tended to agree that “God is embodied in the world and universe, rather than separate from it.”* Pantheism asserts that "all is God" while some versions of panentheism suggest that the universe is nothing more than the manifestation of God. In addition, some forms indicate that the universe is contained within God. Perhaps here we have a warning that despite the good and noble intentions of Christian environmentalists, a boundary is being crossed, that removes it from mainstream orthodoxy.