

THE NICENE CREED



Matthew 28:16 "And Jesus came and said to (the disciples), 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

Last week at our Pentecost celebration, the congregation was asked to renew our own baptismal covenant, using the ancient words of the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed, though not actually written by the Apostles, has been used in some form since the early part of the second century in the Church as part of the Baptismal service. However on most Sunday mornings, we do not recite as our statement of faith the old Apostles' Creed, our baptismal covenant. We repeat instead the longer and much more complicated Nicene Creed. But why? Why do we recite the

Nicene Creed on most Sundays, when it is perhaps the most confusing or disconcerting part of the Service for many people? Why do we change creeds on some days, but use the Nicene Creed on most days? I shall tell why.

In the year 589, a council of Spanish bishops meeting in the city of Toledo decided to require the Nicene Creed be recited at all Eucharists within their dioceses, a practice which later spread throughout the Western Christian Church. Prior to that time, no one ever recited the Nicene Creed at services. The Nicene Creed was not written to be recited at church services. The Creed was a conciliar agreement from the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. We don't read other theological statements from the long list of Church councils over the centuries, do we? So why then did those Spanish Bishops in Toledo decide suddenly to require the recitation of the Nicene Creed at all Eucharists two hundred fifty years after it was first written?

Well, in the course of the fifth century most of Spain was conquered by the invading Visigoths from the north. The Visigoths were Christians, but unlike the Christians they found in Spain, the Goths were Arian Christians, that is, they were followers of Arius, a bishop of the fourth century, who had been very much a part of that great Trinitarian controversies of that time. The King of the Visigoths eventually converted to the

indigenous Roman Catholic Christianity and in order to force his people to accept his newly found form of Christianity, the King and the Spanish Bishops contrived to include the Nicene Creed in all the services. That is because the Nicene Creed was unacceptable to the Arians and would therefore force them to support that which they did not believe at the Mass. Not in my mind a very good reason to recite anything in church.

For the Nicene Creed was the very statement which divided the Church between Arians and non-Arians. And there were two great protagonists in this debate; Arius and Athanasius. Athanasius' side won at Nicaea, so he became a hero of the Church, a bishop, a saint. Indeed I discovered the elaborate tomb of St. Athanasius in Venice some years ago on a visit, his relics removed from Alexandria by Venetian merchants when the Moslems conquered Egypt in the seventh century. Arius' views lost at Nicaea and thus he was considered an arch-heretic, his grave forgotten, his writings banned and thus mostly lost to us.

The question which Arius and Athanasius disputed about was the exact nature of the Trinity. Arius, for instance, strongly maintained the Hebraic monotheism of the early Church, our inherited Jewish affirmation that there is but one God. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall have no other God beside him." While Arius and his followers allowed

that Jesus was uniquely divine, yet Arius stressed that the Son is not equal to the Father, who alone was the one true God.

The opponents of Arius rallied around the then young deacon from Alexandria named Athanasius, who insisted that the Son must be seen as eternal and equal with the Father. But that is polytheism, said the Arians, acceptable perhaps to the Greeks in the Church, who had a long history of polytheism, but not acceptable to any valid Jewish Christian tradition. The Council of Nicaea, that first great Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church, called by the Emperor Constantine the Great, a new convert to Christianity himself, argued then about the true nature of the Trinity.

The differences between the two parties were extremely technical. The Arians, for instance, accepted the phrases in the Nicene Creed of "only begotten" or "first born of all creation," even "God of God," meaning "made God by God," but the Arians could not accept the Greek term "*homoousious*" to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, a word which is found in the Nicene Creed and translates as "very God of very God." The Arians could not affirm the Son as being of one substance with the Father, because that would make them substantially the same, that would make Jesus coeternal and coequal with the Father, which in the eyes of the Arians denied the Hebraic monotheism of the Church. The Arians proposed

instead the Greek word "*homoiousios*" which translates "like God of God," not "very God of very God" but "like God of God," of a like substance, the way a natural son is like his father, but is still substantially different.

So that in the end, the dispute between the Arians and the followers of Athanasius came down to one word, indeed one syllable of one word, one umlaut. Yet that was not good enough for Athanasius and his followers. The Council at Nicaea issued a shorter version of what we call the Nicene Creed, but one still aimed specifically at opposing Arius and his followers, who were then banished from the Roman Empire and exiled, exiled mostly to the barbaric north, where they continued witnessing for the Gospel and in the end converted the Visigoths. The Nicene Creed became the standard formula for orthodoxy in the remainder of the Church even though it went far beyond the Hebraic tradition and the biblical concepts in the New Testament, and even beyond the ancient baptismal covenant of the older Apostle's Creed. Thus, the Nicene Creed was in its day not a unifying force, as we tend to think of it today, but a divisive one. It was the principal weapon used to suppress much lively thinking or discussion of the Christian faith within the Church. And the Spanish bishops in Toledo by requiring its recitation in the Eucharist continued this trend of using the Nicene Creed as a

weapon, as a weapon against Christians who did not entirely agree with them.

I, for one, regret the decision of the Council of Toledo and I would like to see the day when we again no longer recite the Nicene Creed on Sundays. We should spend more time trying to experience God in our lives, and less time trying to understand and define him so accurately. Jesus is indeed experienced as a unique reflection of the Mystery of God for Christians, a unique person who somehow makes God more real and accessible to us. Yet our words and our phrases and our feeble doctrines cannot really articulate the Truth of this matter, they can only hint at it. For in the end God does, and must, remain a mystery, not to be understood and defined, but a mystery to be experienced and lived. AMEN.