The Council of Nicaea

John 16.12 "Jesus said to the disciples, 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.'"

This year is the 1,700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed. So, all around the globe this year, there are various Christian celebrations marking this historic event. For the First Council of Nicaea is often considered to be the first Great Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church, though I am not sure why the so-

called Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts, is not considered the first. Still just twelve years prior to that Council of Nicaea, the Christian Church was legally outlawed in the Roman Empire and was in the midst of the Great Persecution under Emperor Diocletian, so this public gathering of more than 300 bishops, responding to a summons from the new Roman emperor Constantine, a Christian catechumen even, to come to his summer palace in Nicaea in May of the year 325, represents a significant change of fortunes for the church, and a big move towards its institutionalization and political power.

The Nicene Creed adopted there was principally to resolve the Arian controversy, whose leader, Arius, was a priest in Alexandria, who had simply objected to his bishop's apparent carelessness in blurring the distinction between the nature of the Father and the nature of the Son. Some of you may remember my sermon series in the summer of 2022 entitled "A Month of Heresies," as I reviewed some of the many Christological controversies of that time.

Arius, you may recall, was a strong monotheist in the Abrahamic tradition, who believed that his bishop, Alexander's teachings were deluding our historic Jewish inheritance of monotheism, which importantly contrasted with the pagan polytheism of the Roman Empire. Nicaea was in the end a battle between Alexander's successor, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, against

the lowly presbyter Arius. And of course, Athanasius won the battle, and subsequent history was written by the victors.

In recent decades, scholars such as Rowan Williams, who was one of my tutors at Oxford University, and later became Archbishop of Canterbury, devoted immense attention to Arius and Arianism, stressing that the two are by no means the same. Their scholarship raises questions about the Nicene conflict, questions that should be asked about many of our church's debates.

The first question is, *How do we know what we know?* In earlier times, the winning side in theological struggles like this one customarily demanded the utter destruction of the documents in which their rivals had dared to present their views, and Nicaea was no exception. Not only were all Arian documents to be destroyed, but the death penalty awaited those bold souls who might try to conceal such contraband items. Obviously, then, we can never know in their own words what the Arians really believed with any precision, and we are thus unable to report these controversies in any kind of fair or balanced way.

My principal complaint with the Nicene Creed is that it is not the great unifier of the Church as it will be celebrated by so many this year. It is, instead, I believe, a great divider of the Church, with a long history of divisiveness over the subsequent centuries. The Council of Nicaea supposedly concluded with an overwhelming sense of unity, which is in fact thoroughly deceptive. Among those who voted for the new creed were some, and

perhaps many, who thoroughly disagreed with it, but who would not publicly resist imperial decisions from the first Christian Roman Emperor. Those covert critics were content to bide their time and to fight the battle for truth once more when occasion arose, and they did so. Under the next Emperor, Constantius, the Nicene party was largely crushed in a local council in 360 at Constantinople, where all previous creeds were declared rejected.

Thus, note then, that the actual Creed approved at Nicaea is not the one we call the Nicene Creed. The original was reworked and amended at the so-called Second Great Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church in Constantinople in 381, with some noteworthy omissions and some significant additions,. That amended version is what we recite today as the so-called Nicene Creed (see the chart on the insert in your bulletin for details, if interested).

After the Council of Nicaea, Arianism, of course, was declared a heresy, and he and his followers were banished from the Roman Empire! Many of them ended up in Germany where they went about converting the pagan Goths there to Christianity. Then at the Third Council of Toledo in 589, the local diocesan bishops gathered there, decided to further add the *filioque* clause to our so-called Nicene Creed. *Filioque* is Latin for "*and the Son*," words which were added to the second line in the last paragraph of the so-called Nicene Creed. Eastern Orthodox Christians have long argued that that any kind of addition was a violation of the Third

Great Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church at Ephesus in 431, which declared in no uncertain terms that it is "*unlawful for any (one) to bring forward, or to write, or to compose a different (Creed) as a rival to that established by the holy Fathers assembled with the Holy Ghost in Nicaea*." As a result, the *filioque* clause eventually became one of the main causes for the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054. Some of you may have noted that the filioque clause may now be omitted in the Episcopal Church, and we have done so at times and will do so again this summer.

Nevertheless, the Episcopal Church is oddly bound by this rubric that requires the recitation of what we call the Nicene Creed at all Eucharists on all Sundays and all Major Feasts of the Church, with only a few exceptions. Why must we do that? We don't recite other conciliar statements at the Eucharist, like the Chalcedonian Statement about Jesus being fully human and fully divine made at the Fourth Great Ecumenical Council of the Church at Chalcedon in 451. The Nicene Creed was not ordered to be recited by the Council of Nicaea, nor was it anywhere for at least two hundred years afterwards. Last week at our Pentecost celebration, in lieu of the Nicene Creed, 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. We must repeat instead the longer and much more complicated so-called 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? I shall tell you why.

In the course of the fifth century most of Spain was conquered by the invading Visigoths from the north. The Visigoths, remember, were now Christians, but alas they were so-called Arian Christians having been originally converted to Christianity by Arius' followers who had earlier been banished from the Roman Empire. That Western Roman Empire itself had collapsed in 476, but the Roman Catholic Church survived. So that at the Second Council of Toledo in Spain in 527, there were both Arian and Catholic Bishops in attendance and in agreement, but at the Third Council of Toledo in Spain in 589, the bishops in attendance not only added the filioque clause to the Nicene Creed, but then required all those in attendance to denounce Arian Christianity and accept the Nicene Creed, which was then ordered to be recited at every single Communion Service in the dioceses of Spain, so that "henceforward no one could plead ignorance as an excuse for misbelief." This practice later spread throughout the Western Christian Church, and then the Eastern Orthodox churches. Prior to that time, no one ever recited the Nicene Creed at services. The required recitation of the Nicene Creed was therefore introduced

solely to ‘correct’ the supposed Arian heresies of those Visigoths with the one, true faith, though the actual creed from Nicaea had long been amended and added to.

By the time of the Reformation, many Protestant churches simply stopped using the controversial Nicene Creed altogether, often in favor of the older Apostles’ Creed. The Church of England simply reduced the requirement of reciting it to *only* Sundays and Major Feasts, and not every Eucharist. (Still, I hope to live long enough to see that requirement be dropped completely). As the Ecumenical Officer for this diocese, I reminded our new bishop, when he suggested to me that the Nicene Creed was the great unifier of the church, that most Evangelicals believe that the Nicene Creed is not founded upon secure biblical grounds, and is thus rejected as a statement of the Christian faith. Our regular use of the Nicene Creed continues then to be more divisive than unifying, dividing up these Christians from those, the so-called Catholics from the so-called Arians, the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Western Catholic Church, the more conservative Evangelicals from mainline Protestant Christians!

Historians, of course, can only speculate what Christianity would look like if Arius had won the debate at Nicaea. But perhaps we don’t have to look too far to find an answer. Every two years, Ligonier (Líg ō neer) Ministries undertakes its State of Theology survey, the findings of which regularly demonstrate the growing gulf separating the actual beliefs of modern American Christians

from the official doctrines of their own churches. For example, more than 65 percent of those recently surveyed agreed at least somewhat with the purely Arian statement that “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.” On the other side of the equation, the share of believers strongly rejecting that statement, and thus asserting instead their historical solidarity with Athanasius, is less than 20 percent. What impact then did that Arian controversy at the Council of Nicaea really have on the lived behavior of ordinary believers? Surely the answer is virtually none. It seems that for modern Christians, the Council of Nicaea was something that happened only to other people, except for our still required recitation of that so-called Nicene Creed. Amen.