

A Lent Course
Celebrating Nicaea:
seeing afresh the faith which holds us together

Session 1: Setting the scene

Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Introduction to this Lent Course

Why are we thinking about the Nicene Creed during Lent? The year 2025 marks the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, a key moment in the history of Christian faith and a vital 'staging post' on the journey towards Christian unity.

In 325 the Council of Nicaea brought together for the first time bishops from all over the then Christian world to reflect on the nature and identity of Jesus Christ, and what it means to speak of him as both divine and human. It began a process that was eventually to lead sixty or so years later to the formulation of what is now called the Nicene Creed, regularly used by millions of Christians, including Anglicans, to proclaim their faith Sunday by Sunday. In a special way this is part of our heritage in the Diocese in Europe, as the ancient city of Nicaea is now the modern town of Iznik in Turkey, which is within this diocese. Over the coming 12 months we will explore in a number of ways the importance of the Council of Nicaea for 21st century Anglicans.

Watch:

The Significance of Nicaea - a short (4'30") and accessible introduction by Prof Jane Williams, Anglican academic, and Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Here two renowned Anglican theologians speak in an accessible way about the Nicene Creed, helping to set the scene for what it to come in the course.



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Listen:

'The Nicene Creed' - an episode of In Our Time, broadcast in 2007. The whole programme lasts 41 minutes, but you could listen to just the first ten minutes which are a highly accessible introduction to the main aspects of the background to the Creed. (The discussion then moves into a more academic analysis, equally interesting but more dense.)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b008jglt>

The first minute of the programme serves as a clear introduction:

'We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.'

Thus begins the Nicene Creed, a statement of essential faith spoken for over 1600 years in Christian churches: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. But what's become a universal statement was written for a very particular purpose: to defeat a 4th century theological heresy called Arianism, and to establish that Jesus Christ was, indeed, God. The story of the Creed is in many ways the story of early Christianity, a philosophical theology and realpolitik. It changed the Church, it changed the Roman Empire, but that it has lasted for more than 1600 years would seem extraordinary to those who created it.

Leading question for this session

Creeds: what are they, why bother with them, how many are there?

What is a creed?

The word 'creed' comes from a Latin word *credo* meaning 'I believe and trust'. A creed is therefore a statement of that in which the Christian church believes and trusts. The reason we're thinking about the Nicene Creed in 2025 is that it is celebrating its 1700th anniversary, an early version of it having first been written down in the year AD325.

Why should we bother with the creeds as part of Christian believing? Two images might help us. First, if you think of your faith as being like looking down a footpath leading away from you across a large field, the creeds can be thought of as like the edges to that path which, by being clearly marked, enable you to see the path much further into the distance than if its edges were blurred. Or to use a nautical image, the creeds might be thought of as the handrails on the deck of a boat which in rough weather enable you to keep your feet planted on the deck.

In other words, the creeds help us to see further, more deeply, into our faith; and they help us to stand firm when our faith is challenged or tested, in a world which is constantly changing and throwing us off balance.

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How do the creeds relate to the Bible?

If there was no Bible, there would be no creeds. The Bible is the primary text of the church, and the creeds are condensed statements of belief, emerging from what the Bible says. However, what the Bible says is rarely straightforward. Very often its words are puzzling, if not enigmatic. Over the centuries members of the church have debated passionately about a range of things found in the Bible, from what happens to bread and wine at a service of holy communion, to, in our day, whether marriage should extend to same sex couples. Although as Christians the people involved in those debates share a belief that the Bible is the authoritative text for the church, they do interpret Scripture differently. These differences lead to heated debates, as we know in our own day, and it was the same in the first few hundred years of the church's life.

Those early debates concerned the most fundamental matters of Christian faith, such as how we can speak of Jesus Christ as both human and divine. The result of those debates were the creeds, which once and for all declared what was to be thought of as orthodox, from two Greek words *orthos*, meaning 'straight or right', and *doxa* meaning 'opinion.' Thus, whilst many of us might have assumed that the creeds resulted from a professor of theology, sitting calmly in their ivory tower, putting pen to paper and writing down what we should all believe, we would be quite wrong. The creeds in fact came about through a much messier, more dynamic and deeply human process in which the truth, as discerned by members of the church meeting together as a Council, emerged through fierce debate.

This course aims to help us in three ways:

1. To learn about the Nicene Creed, and the place of creeds more generally in the church's life and liturgy
2. To understand the meaning of the Nicene Creed. The words of the Creed are not straightforward and so they need to be explained.
3. To be inspired by the Nicene Creed. Deeper understanding of our faith is never for our sake but so that we may serve God more faithfully, in worship and mission.

Hopefully, by Easter, we'll have a greater sense of unity as we see afresh the faith which holds us together.

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How many creeds are there?

There are three main creeds. Apart from the Nicene Creed, the two other best known are the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. You may be familiar with them.

The title 'Apostles' Creed' was first used c.390.[1] The creed is used especially at services of baptism and confirmation. In the early centuries of the Christian Church people who were preparing for baptism learned a short summary of what Christians believe. One version became accepted as the Apostles' Creed, because it was thought to include the essential teaching of the twelve apostles, Jesus' earliest followers. It was into that faith of the apostles that Christians were, and are, baptised:

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.

The Athanasian Creed is longer (so we won't put the whole of it here) and is very different to the other two, being written in the 5th century for the guidance of teachers. It includes 'damnatory' clauses, which make for alarming reading. As rendered in the Book of Common Prayer it begins,
 Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.
 Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

Despite being totally unsuitable to include in liturgy and never intended for that purpose it has, nevertheless, found its way into those of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches, although it is rarely used today.

[1] 'Apostles' Creed, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church

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What happened at Nicaea, and what was at stake?

The Nicene Creed is the one most commonly used today in Christian churches. The circumstances leading up to its composition included a Roman Emperor who wanted to unify his empire by ensuring everyone in the churches in his empire was united, 'singing from the same hymn sheet', and church leaders who were arguing fiercely about what the church should believe about the person of Jesus Christ: what does it mean to speak of him as both divine and human?

The Emperor in question, Constantine, called the bishops to meet at his palace at Nicaea to resolve the argument. Known as the First Council of Nicaea, it was a kind of giant General Synod meeting, attended by some 300 bishops plus their staffs, bringing the total to between 1200-1900 people. They represented, in theory at least, the church in every part of the Roman Empire.

Many of those who met had suffered greatly for their faith under persecution. These had been launched by Constantine's predecessors as Emperor, culminating with Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. The church's experience of suffering, almost to the point of extinction, meant the stakes at Nicaea were very high: the faith which they debated had been literally a matter of life and death for many attending.

The bishops debated aggressively for over two months, and issued a form of words to sum up their conclusions. Although not identical to the Creed we say in our churches today as we've explained, it provided its template. We call this 'the Creed from Nicaea', which was added to and slightly amended to become, some sixty years later as we've already said, the 'Nicene Creed'.^[2]

Thus, the Nicene Creed emerged through a heady mixture of politics and theology.

In the coming weeks we'll learn about the views of two of the main theologians:

Arius, a 69-year-old priest who was leader of a Christian community in the area of Alexandria, Egypt. He may or may not have attended the Council, 'but there is no evidence that he took any part in the proceedings, and it seems unlikely.'^[3] The ideas contained in his teaching however, were central to the proceedings. Arius is what we might call today a populist.

Athanasius, a 27-year-old deacon-secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria.

They were reading the same Bible, but they came to different conclusions about what it was saying about Jesus in relation to God the Father.

[2] This helpful way of distinguishing the two creeds is given by Philip Cary in his book *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction*, on page 7

[3] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, page 90

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Next week we'll start to look in detail at the views of these two men. For now let's see if we can gain some clues firsthand about what was being debated by reading side-by-side the texts of the two creeds which emerged from the meeting in Nicaea and from the meeting in Constantinople some sixty years later. On the next page you'll see the two creeds set out side by side. Dotted lines separate the different sections to make it easier to compare them.

Read the words slowly and carefully. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What here is familiar to me in each, yet I realise I'm not clear about its meaning?
2. Which parts are difficult to make sense of because there are words I don't recognise?
3. Where do the two creeds differ from one another in what they say and don't say; are these clues about what was being debated?

Write down your answers to these questions, and bring them to the session, where you can discuss them with others.



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The Creed of Nicaea
from First Council of Nicaea (325)

We believe in One God,
 Father, Almighty,
 the Maker of all things visible and invisible.

.....
 And in One Lord Jesus Christ,
 the Son of God,
 begotten from the Father, Only-begotten,
 that is from the substance of the Father;
 God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten not made,
 consubstantial with the Father,
 by whom all things were made,
 both things in heaven and things on earth;
 who for us men and for our salvation came down,

and was incarnate, was made man, suffered,

and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven,

and is coming to judge living and dead.

.....

And in the Holy Spirit.

.....

Appendix

And those who say 'There once was when He was not' and, 'Before being begotten He was not,' and 'He came into being out of nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'from another hypostasis or substance', or 'created', or 'alterable', or 'mutable', the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

The Nicene Creed
from First Council of Constantinople (381)

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.

For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven;
 was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
 and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
 he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
 in accordance with the Scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the
 dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.

.....

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]*,
 who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
 glorified,
 who has spoken through the prophets.

.....

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
 sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
 and the life of the world to come. Amen.

.....

[*the words 'and the Son' (known as the filioque clause, filioque meaning 'and the Son' in Latin) were a later addition to the Creed, which caused great distress to the Eastern Orthodox churches, because of the way it was done. We explore this further in Session 5]