

The following is part of the definition of the Nicene Creed
from the Episcopal Dictionary.

It's dry as a bone.

Nicene Creed - It was first issued by the Council of Nicaea in 325,
but in the form used today
it is frequently thought to have been perfected
at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

It states the full divinity of the Son, the second Person of the Trinity,
in opposition to Arius.

It also states the full divinity of the Holy Spirit,
as denied by Macedonius.

The use of the Nicene Creed in the eucharist (right after the gospel),
in contrast to the use of the Apostles' Creed in baptism,
began in the fifth century in Antioch
and became the universal practice in the church.

That's gist of the definition of the Nicene Creed
in the Episcopal Dictionary.

But back in the Roman Empire in the early 4th century,
things were far from settled or clear.

We are used to denominations having
different beliefs and worship styles.

But just a few things are basic in the modern Christian church.

Those things are almost universally agreed,
and they are the articles of the Nicene Creed.

The Council of Nicaea was called by Emperor Constantine,
the first Roman Emperor to overtly declare himself as a Christian.

When Constantine said he was a Christian,
he found himself entering a squabble
among various Christian groups that all vied for his attention.

Now that was very easy to say,
but the reality was far more difficult.

After the first century, the century of Jesus,
the disciples and the Gospels,
the church grew but slowly.

It did grow throughout the known world

from the far east in Persia
 to the far west in North Africa and the Iberian peninsula.
 It penetrated Egypt and the Sudan to the south
 and banged on the doorway of the Alps and the Caucasuses.
 Each city and village had their own church
 and church leaders who came to be known as Bishops.

Because of their relative isolation,
 they developed their own version of Christianity,
 and they worked very hard to understand
 the roles of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

They became passionate about their own theological ideas.
 Faith arguments are always very passionate,
 after all they deal with the things
 that are most close to our hearts
 and are the most ambiguous.

How do humans define God?
 How do you explain the unexplainable?
 As is the case in many arguments, especially about faith,
 the rule seemed to be “volume overcomes logic.”

Some of the ideas began to converge as theological statements.
 The church powers began to identify some of these
 as contrary to the faith.

Among them were Marcion who held
 that Jesus had supplanted the religion of the Jews,
 so he took all references to the Hebrew scriptures
 out of his bible.

Montanus taught to totally withdraw from society.
 Mani created a movement which dealt with the origin of evil,
 denying the omnipotence of God
 and postulating two opposite powers good and evil.

But the most pressing question was posed by an Alexandrian priest,
 Was Jesus equal to God, having always existed?
 Or was he created by God and therefore had not always existed?
 The priest was named Arius.
 Arianism became a symbolic issue

which divided the Greek speaking east
from the Latin speaking west.

Mostly likely Constantine was in the midst of a major political fight
which was wrapped in Christian garb.

At any rate he called the Council at Nicaea

which was to have all bishops in attendance.

Well, it didn't work out that way.

The western bishops showed up in great numbers.

The eastern bishops had a hard way to travel and showed up late.

Votes had been taken and the beginnings of the creed

which we call the Nicene Creed was approved.

It became the standard by which Christianity

was to be known and believed.

Any deviation from it was outside orthodox Christianity.

Subsequently another Council was held to clarify some language,

and we have the creed as we know it.

One can break down the creed in to articles.

Clearly the first three are

about God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The article about Jesus is lengthy and is probably the critical one.

The article about the Holy Spirit became an issue over

where the Holy Spirit comes from.

The articles about the church, baptism, resurrection

and the life to come finish out the creed.

You will be hearing about all of these

from our five preachers this Epiphany season.

So why is this ancient creed used in Episcopal worship?

The Apostles Creed which we will hear and say in a few minutes

is considered to be the baptismal creed.

It predates the Nicene Creed by perhaps 200 years.

But it didn't answer the pressing questions

which lead to the Council of Nicea.

Yet the Apostles Creed is one of our two standard creeds.

But wait, we don't claim to be a creedal church.

We don't have a set standard of belief

which we require all Episcopalians
to honor, learn and swear allegiance too.

Well, over time Anglicans realized
that the creed is one of those statements
that connect us to the catholic and apostolic church.

One of our Anglican fore bearers said that
the Anglican way is based on three things,
First and foremost is scripture.

It is on scripture that we are to base all we do
and all we believe.

Second is the tradition we have received.

The tradition begins with the ancient church
of which the Nicene Creed is a part
as is the Apostles Creed
and the Athanasian Creed
and the worship practices of the church through time.

Third is reason. Reason is our ability to think through
what we believe and apply
scripture and tradition to current problems.

My task today is to lay the foundation for our five looks
at the articles in the creed
and to discuss the first article:

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

These simple statements are based clearly in scripture.

It speaks of a pre-existing God who creates all that is and can be.

It speaks of God as a divine parent who is all powerful.

It also speaks of an awareness which might be

beyond our knowing, that is, all that is seen and unseen.

The ancients believed in a world outside of that which is known.

This is basically a Platonic idea

that was a part of early Christian understanding.

Plato's philosophy was so pervasive

that it was just how people thought.

They didn't know a different way to think.
Plato is still with us and is throughout
our Christian understanding.

It has only been in the 20th Century
that philosophers and theologians have realized
the depth of Platonic ideas in our faith.

This God is the one who encountered Moses as I am who I am.
This was being, not a being.

God is not an object but is a subject.

Consider this as a view of God.

God is the unique Subject,
whose love is the foundation of all reality.

It is through God's love that all things live and move
and have their being.

God is the supremely related One,
sharing the experience of every creature,
and being experienced by every creature.

God's power in the world is necessarily persuasive, not coercive.

God acts by self-revelation.

God, who is the source of our freedom, cannot coerce the world.

God is omniscient, knowing everything there is to know, perfectly.

But this means knowing the future as open,
as a range of possibilities and probabilities,
not as fixed or settled.

God is co-eternal with the world
and shares the adventure of time with us.

There has always been a world of some sort
in which God has been creatively active.

God is omnipresent.

Every person (indeed, every creature)
in every moment is experiencing God
as the ground of both order and freedom.

God at once makes freedom possible
and calls us to choose the good,
to choose God's vision for the world.

Thus God works in the world by continual
and universal self-revelation.
But our experience of God is inherently interwoven
with our experience of the world,
so that these shape each other.
God struggles to reach us through the dark glass
that obscures our vision.
Thus revelation is omnipresent
and ongoing, but always ambiguous.
Similarly, God is the ground of the world's becoming.
In nature, as in history, God acts in the world by self-revelation.
But here, too, the power of God is inherently interwoven
with the power of the world.
Every event reflects both the power of God
and the power of the world.
The world may be more or less responsive to God,
but there are no separate events in our world
standing outside the laws of nature and history
at which we can point and say, "God alone did that."
**We believe in one God,
the Father,
the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

Sermon preached by
The Rev. Perry W. Polk
Grace Episcopal Church
Fairfield, CA
January 10, 2016