

EXPLORING OUR FAITH

A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 13 – The Nicene Creed

This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.

The Nicene Creed as response. Our Sunday worship has a “proclamation and response” form. In the first “Word of God” half, we listen to the proclamation of God’s word in Holy Scripture and then respond with sermon, creed, prayers and confession. Today in this note we explore the creed, which seems to many a kind of intrusion in the flow of worship. What is it doing here? Why its puzzling technicalities? Why a profession of faith in the midst of prayer? What if we have questions about some elements of the creed? Well, to get started some historical perspective is in order.

What is the Nicene Creed? Creeds existed from the earliest years of the Church. The Apostles’ Creed, which we recite at baptisms or when we renew our baptismal vows, is the most ancient; it developed out of common use to help define for people the essentials of what they had to believe to be part of the Christian movement. The Nicene Creed has a more formal status. It was adopted by a general council of all the bishops of the Church in 325. This council was convened by the Emperor Constantine, and amended by a second council in 381 to produce the version we recite today. Constantine wanted uniformity of belief in what he had made the State religion of his empire. Originally the Nicene Creed was not recited in the Eucharist; it was added in response to heresies in the later Middle Ages. The contents of the creed still divide the Church. The Western Church (Rome) added the *filioque* (Latin: “and the Son”) clause in the late sixth century to describe the Holy Spirit as descending from the Son as well as the Father. The Eastern Church (the Orthodox) never approved this, and since it was not approved by the whole Church, and creates some theological problems, the Anglican Communion liturgical authorities now suggest that it be omitted, as we do at St. Andrew’s.

The function of reciting the creed. Reciting the creed as response to Scripture readings and sermon, and standing to do so, serves a function like reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at civic occasions. It affirms who we are as Christians in the apostolic tradition, that we respond with hearts and wills to what we have just heard. It is a “we” affirmation, not an “I” one: we may not understand every detail of the creed, but we are part of a tradition and a community that the creed stands for. We are members of something bigger and older than us. We “live into” a faith bequeathed to us by the saints. Responding with the creed unites us as a community as we move to prayer and Communion.

Another approach to “orthodoxy.” So recitation of the Nicene Creed each week is one approach to confirming “orthodox” Christian belief. Another approach is suggested by something called the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral. This is a document that can be found among the historical documents in the back pages of the Book of Common Prayer (specifically, pp. 876-77). It was adopted by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church and then by the Lambeth Conference of all the Anglican bishops. The Quadrilateral approaches orthodoxy by setting forth four “essentials” required for unity of the various branches of the Christian Church. Here is the document:

That, in the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God's blessing made towards Home Reunion:

- (a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as "containing all things necessary to salvation," and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- (b) The Apostles' Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- (c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself--Baptism and the Supper of the Lord --ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- (d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

Here the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds appear as the second article of orthodox ecclesiology, but they are combined with Scripture, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, and the historic episcopate "locally adapted . . . to the varying needs of the nations and peoples." Perhaps it is in this wider context that we can better understand the function of the Creed in worship. It is a calling out for the unity of the whole Church, of which our particular piece is only a partial expression.