



I've recited the Nicene Creed more times than I can remember. I expect you have too. I wonder if you've also been guilty of letting its familiarity cause your mind to wander as you say it? Or perhaps you sometimes find yourself dwelling on a phrase, wondering what it really means? 2025 was the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicea, the meeting of Church leaders which gave birth to the Creed. To mark this anniversary Peter Watsham and I recently led a group exploring the Creed over five evenings in Lympstone Church. This article shares a few highlights from our meetings.

The Creed was a response to a crisis about the identity of Jesus. Arius, a Church leader in Alexandria, argued Jesus was a lesser figure than God the Father. This was dangerous teaching and threatened to undermine the health of the Church. The Bible explains our salvation depends on getting Jesus's identity right - that Jesus was fully man, but is also fully God. As Bishop Gregory of Nazianzus helpfully and succinctly explained when the Creed was being composed "Jesus became what He was not (i.e. man) without ceasing to be what He was (i.e. God)".

The Roman Emperor Constantine called a meeting of Church leaders to resolve the conflict about Jesus's identity. The Council of Nicea was a lively occasion according to surviving accounts. One account tells the story of Bishop Nicholas slapping Arius across the face because he was so incensed feeling Jesus was being dishonoured. Although he was put in jail for the night the episode didn't prevent him later being made St Nicholas and inspiring the figure of Father Christmas! After much debate the core of the Creed was agreed with virtual unanimity for its text, clearly refuting Arius's views. However, Arius and his supporters fought back, and divisions continued so that

another Council was convened, the Council of Constantinople in 381AD. Additional text was added, forming around the final third of the Creed, and a final addition was made about the Holy Spirit at the Council of Toledo in 589AD thereby giving us the Creed we recite today.

There's nothing more important than properly understanding who Jesus is. It's because the Creed so successfully describes how Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith that it has stood the test of time. The Creed is not the Bible, but it helpfully guides us to understand the Bible. Rightly understood it prevents phrases from the Bible being taken out context and misapplied, as was happening at the time the Creed was written. Its text leaves no room to question that Jesus is fully God, while also clearly stating that Jesus was a human being who was born and died. The implication is that in Jesus's humanity He took upon Himself our sin by dying on the cross. However, by being God Jesus rose again and will return as judge. We spent much time discussing these wonderful truths and their implications for us. We reflected on the phrase "Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead" and appreciated that it is only by placing our complete trust in Jesus that we can pass through His judgement, acknowledging He has already paid the penalty we deserve.

Two of our five sessions were spent dwelling on the roles of God as Father, and the Holy Spirit. In addition to learning from some of the key Bible passages, it was mutually encouraging to share how the Holy Spirit has been working in our lives and the awesome privilege of knowing God as our Father. We also found it helpful unpacking the meaning of some of the phrases in the Creed. For example, some wondered why we Anglicans dutifully say they believe in a "catholic" Church! However, the use of "catholic" in the literal sense of 'universal' helped us to explore how the Church on earth imperfectly foreshadows the perfect Biblical picture of the Church as Jesus's bride, united in the New Creation. Another example was understanding how the Bible explains the phrase used in the Creed that we acknowledge "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins". We learned from looking at the Bible that baptism is a picture of being washed clean of our sins, and that the baptismal rite of being immersed and brought out of water is a helpful picture of how at our baptism we are publicly identifying ourselves with Jesus's death and resurrection and putting our trust in Him.

It is for good reason our clergy sometimes pause to explain the meaning of particular phrases or prayers as we follow through the familiar liturgy of our services. We should be grateful they do this because, as we discovered by exploring the Nicene Creed, we mustn't let over-familiarity with liturgy blind us to how it guides us to understand the wonders and privileges of our Christian faith. So, let's dwell on the deep meaning of the Nicene Creed as we say it together and be thankful for the Church leaders who wrote it long ago.

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