

About eighteen months ago I was having a conversation with a former member of this church who has since moved away. She was commenting on the way I conduct the services. In the main she considered the way I took the services to be satisfactory but she did upbraid me for saying the creed too fast. I ventured to suggest that we could shorten it or might omit altogether. In response to this suggestion she was visibly shocked. ‘Whatever next?!’, she said, ‘you’ll be leaving out the Bible next!’. I was thinking about this conversation when I began to prepare this sermon. Because this year we celebrate the one thousand, seven hundredth anniversary of the Council of Nicea which put the creed we use together – well at least some parts of it. Before preparing this sermon I checked with Ian, our music director, that the choir wouldn’t be singing a choral version of the Nicene Creed, of which there are many. If you had’ve been I would have had to modify my words and certainly cut down the length of the sermon – some choral creeds are very long indeed. Palestrina – whose 500th anniversary we celebrate this year – wrote some long credos in his 100 or so masses. Anyway, I thought you might like to know a little bit about what happened all those years ago and the big issue the Nicene fathers (and maybe a few mothers) were tackling.

The council took place in the small town of Nicea not far from Istanbul. It began on July 4th 325. The council of Nicaea was big: between 250 and 300 bishops were present as well as about 2,000 supporting priests and deacons. And it was posh. It was convened in the imperial palace and opened by the Emperor Constantine the Great, robed in splendour, who had summoned all these clergy. The reason he called them together was that there were divisions in the church about the faith they held. Constantine was the first emperor to accept Christianity and he wanted the religion to hold his empire together. But for that to be the case Christians had to hold one faith. Constantine pressed the church leaders to come to an agreement about what they believed. This was a great moment in the history of the Church. For three centuries Christians had suffered periodic persecutions, some instigated by Roman emperors. Among the bishops gathered some carried the scars of those times. One bishop from Egypt was missing an eye; another was crippled in both hands as a result of being tortured with red-hot irons. But their divisions threatened their new status; they had to come to an agreement.

So what decisions did the council arrive at? To begin with it fixed a common date for Easter, because beforehand different churches had different dates. Even today we still use the council’s method to fix the date of Easter. Another group

of decisions it made concerned the clergy. It banned money lending among the clergy and the prohibited fast-track promotion of recent converts to clerical posts. The council also declared that overzealous Christians who had voluntarily castrated themselves couldn't be ordained. I'm betting that doesn't come up at most ordination panels these days. It also sorted out a schism that existed in the Egyptian church. One thing it did not do, in spite of what Dan Brown tells us in *The Da Vinci Code*, was to decide about which books should be in the Bible and which shouldn't. That subject was not even on the agenda.

But the key task undertaken by the council was sorting out the vexed question of the status of Jesus. Basically, at the time of the council, there were two understandings of Christ in the church. The orthodox view was that Christ was fully and completely God, in exactly the same way of God the Father was God. The alternative view was that Christ was a creation of God the Father, a sort of demi-God if you like. This latter view was put forward by a priest called Arius, a leader of a very influential church in Alexandria. Basically he taught that originally God lived alone. Then he created his son who in turn created everything else. Arius made faith in Christ understandable, especially when he put his teaching in witty rhymes set to catchy tunes. His doctrine held a special appeal for the many recent converts because it made Christianity more like the pagan religions of their childhood: the one supreme God makes a number of lesser gods who do God's work, passing back and forth from heaven to earth. The orthodox belief, that Christ, the Divine Word, existed from all eternity, and is equal to the Almighty Father, was – and is – difficult. So Arianism spread, and this concerned the Emperor Constantine. Constantine viewed the Arian teachings as an 'insignificant' theological matter. But he wanted unity of belief in the church just as he had created unity in the Empire through force. So when diplomatic letters failed to solve the dispute, he convened the council which met for two months, to hammer out a universally acceptable definition of Jesus.

Once the Council of Nicea convened, many of the bishops were ready to compromise. One brilliant young deacon from Alexandria, however, was not. Athanasius, with the support of his bishop, Alexander, insisted that Arius's doctrine left Christianity without a divine Saviour. How can someone who is not fully God, he said, bring us the salvation that only God can grant? Jesus must be fully God. He called for a creed that made clear Jesus Christ's full deity. The debate became intense. There is even a legend that Bishop Nicholas of Myra – that's right, Santa Claus – was so incensed by what Arius said that he hit him in the face. Various statements of faith were proposed and rejected. Eventually an

old creed from Palestine was suggested with some important additions made to counter Arian belief. Into it were inserted an extremely important series of phrases, like, ‘eternally begotten of the Father’, ‘true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father’, and so on. These all emphasised the orthodox belief that Christ is and always has been one with God the Father. Eventually the creed of Nicea was accepted overwhelmingly and Constantine was pleased thinking the issue was settled.

It was not. To begin with the creed as we use it was not complete. The creed made at Nicea ended with the statements about Jesus, followed by a few anathemas excluding people who held Arian views from the church. It took another council around fifty years later to turn it into the creed we know, confirming that the Holy Spirit was also fully God and adding the phrases about the Church, baptism and everlasting life. Furthermore, Arianism was certainly not vanquished by Nicea. It was still going strong in the seventh century, three hundred years later, though after then it dwindled. Furthermore, other variations of belief arose not even touched on by the creed we use. So we are left asking the question, what use is the Nicene Creed and even, should we carry on using it? Negatively it can be argued that the creed was intended to impose an unnatural and unnecessary uniformity on the church which could have thrived just as well with a diversity of doctrine. In the Church of England, for example, we rejoice in being a ‘broad church’ with a diversity of views about all sorts of matters. Constantine wanted uniformity of belief to reflect the unity of his Empire. But that means little to us today so why do we have to recite this creed week in week out that some people might have difficulty in believing? What is more there are things the creed leaves out that some Christians regard as very important about our faith. There is nothing at all about what Jesus taught or did during his ministry, for example. Surely that is really important. A lot of what being a Christian involves is more about doing as Jesus taught and did than it is about believing the right thing.

On the other hand, even if the Nicene Creed is imperfect, many feel that it is valuable to share an expression of faith that has been held and used by the church for so many centuries. At least in certain respects it does summarise a large part of what Christians believe about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes people have said to me that they are uncertain about elements of the creed. Aren’t we all?! But they go on to say that although they may not feel confident about everything in creed, they feel sustained and supported by the fact that we are all saying it together. Maybe it works a bit like this: let’s say

that while today I'm feeling a bit wobbly about the Holy Spirit, they'll be others who are quite confident about that part of the creed. On the other hand, I might be feeling very positive about Jesus being true God and then I can support those who are not quite so sure. By saying the creed corporately, together, we are supporting each other in our belief. What is more this creed, used throughout the Christian world, helps to uphold the oneness and catholicity of the church.

One thousand seven hundred years ago a group of Christians came together to try to put their faith into words that they could all agree on. It was a monumental task and, in truth, one that surpassed human capability. Whenever we try to say things about God we reach the limits of what it is possible to say. But like it or not they had that task and we must thank God that they accomplished it to the best of their ability. That there were defects in the creed they produced we cannot doubt, but we should honour what they achieved and give thanks for the role the Nicene creed has played in unifying and guiding Christians down the centuries. Perhaps this anniversary will help us to remember all who have who strived and still strive to express our belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.