



**Diocese
in Europe**

A Lent Course

Celebrating Nicaea:
seeing afresh the faith which holds us together



Nicene Creed
Celebrations 2025

Leader's Notes



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

Introduction for Leaders

We're delighted that you've taken on the important task of leading this 5-session Lent course in your chaplaincy. These notes are designed to help you prepare by giving you some background to the course, to explain how it is designed to work, and to give you a range of resources.

Training Session

In addition to these written notes there will be a 'live' Zoom introduction offered on two dates in February. This one-hour session will give you the opportunity to learn about the course and its aims, and to ask questions. The format will be the same for both, so you can choose the date and time which suits you best:

10am (CET) on Friday 7 Feb

7pm (CET) on Monday 10 Feb

Please refer to the Chaplaincy Briefing in January for the Zoom links, or contact the Bishop's Chaplain: evelyn.sweerts@europe.anglican.org

After these dates, there will be a recording of one of the sessions on the [website](#).

The 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 for the journey towards Christian unity.

In 325 AD, 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 the Diocese in Europe. Over the coming twelve months we will explore in a number of ways the importance of the Council of Nicaea for 21st century Anglicans.

This course aims to help us in three ways:

- To learn *about* the Nicene Creed, and the place of creeds more generally in the church's life and liturgy
- To understand the meaning *of* the Nicene Creed. The words of the Creed are not straightforward.
- To be inspired *by* the Nicene Creed. Deeper understanding of our faith is never for our sake only, 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 as God's church.

Key dates

This year Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, falls on 5th March.

You might like to run this course during the weeks beginning 10th, 17th, 24th, 31st March, and 7th April.

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday on 13th April.

Easter Day falls on 20th April (and this is one of the years when the date is shared by the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, adding significance to the unifying role of the Nicene Creed).

Trinity Sunday, concluding the first half of the Church's Year, falls on 15th June.

Background

The Nicene Creed which we say today went through a period of development. Following the Council of Nicaea in 325 it appeared in its basic form. The full form of the Creed, which is the one we say today, appeared following the Council of Constantinople in 381.

The 5 Sessions

Session 1 - Why Creeds?

An introduction to the creeds generally in the life of the church, and a first look at the early version of the creed under discussion which emerged in 325. We'll call this the Creed of Nicaea which we'll compare to the Nicene Creed.

Session 2 - Which God?

We'll look in detail at the first part of the Nicene Creed concerning 'one God' and how this description is significant for Jews and Christians. We'll then start to consider the views of two theologians present at the Council, Arius and Athanasius with respect to the Person of Christ.

Session 3 - One Lord: Definitely Divine

We turn to the longest section of the creed beginning 'one Lord, Jesus Christ', which looks at both his divinity and his humanity. Because of the length and significance of this section we'll look at it in two parts, taking up two sessions. In this session we'll consider Christ's divinity.

Session 4 - One Lord: Wholly Human

We then consider Christ's humanity, and the parts of the Creed telling of his life and death. We'll draw together these two parts of the Creed - on Christ's divinity and humanity - and look for their deepest significance.

Session 5 - The Spirit & The Church

In the final session we think about the last two parts of the Creed, on the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, and the Church, and how the decisions made at the Council of Nicaea are fundamental to its worship and mission.

Session format

The idea behind the sessions is to follow the example of the Council of Nicaea itself, in so far as each should be a lively discussion seeking after truth, not a 'talk from the front' giving the correct answers. Your role as leader, therefore, is not to be the expert (although all leaders need to be at least one step ahead of other people) and instead gently to focus the discussion, and guide it to a helpful conclusion. In other words, the point of the course is found in meeting together and the discussion that takes place, through which (God willing) the eternal truths expressed in the Creed will burn brighter and clearer for everyone.

To help you play your vital part in this happening, for each of the five sessions there is written material available on-line which follows a common format:

- **Leader's notes:** a guide about how to approach the topic of the session, based on a one hour session. If you want to spend longer together, that of course is fine. The notes become less prescriptive as the course goes on, because your group will no doubt settle into a rhythm, and participants will become more comfortable with one another, and discussion will flow more easily.
- **Participants' pre-session preparation:** some important background material for participants, which obviously you need to look at, too. It includes both reading and watching a short video or listening to a radio programme. In some cases there are options given, depending on time available. There is also a recap of what was covered in the previous session (apart from the first) and a leading question to focus the session's discussion. The sessions will be enhanced if participants have spent time with this preparation.
- **Handout for you to email to participants, or make copies of to hand out at the session, or perhaps both.** This may include a number of key Bible verses, and a piece of liturgy to show how the Nicene Creed has influenced our worship. It may also have a verse from Hymn to the Trinity, written by Geoffrey Rowell, a previous Bishop in Europe which draws directly from the Nicene Creed and which all chaplaincies are encouraged to sing on Trinity Sunday, 15th June.

Resources

You may want to do some further reading or watch some videos about the Nicene Creed yourself, or there may be course participants who ask you for ideas for going deeper. Either way, here is a selection of books and videos.

Books

Below is a selection of books which build on the material covered in this course. They are arranged in order of increasing level of scholarship.

Philip Cary, The Nicene Creed: An Introduction (230 small pages)

An accessible and basic guide to the Nicene Creed which builds nicely on this course, and is very readable.

Ronald E. Heine, *Classical Christian Doctrine: Introducing the Essentials of the Ancient Faith* (182 pages)

A more advanced book that nevertheless is easy to read and would also be a good next step for course participants.

Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds* (115 pages)

Looking at the place of the Creeds more generally in the life of the Church, this is one of those books that helpfully covers a lot of ground in relatively few pages.

J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines: Revised Edition* (511 pages)

The standard text-book on the history of the first great period in Christian thought.

Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (406 pages)

Describing itself as a 'companion' to J.N.D. Kelly's book, this is a comprehensive treatment of the background and literature of the period between the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon (451).

Franz Dünzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (148 pages)

Focussing on a doctrine, The Trinity, rather than a Creed, this is a delightfully readable book that is at once church history and theology.

Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (378 pages)

Considered to be Rowan Williams's magnum opus, this is a substantial and scholarly book looking at the person at the heart of this course, Arius, and his ideas.

Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (475 pages)

A comprehensive and scholarly account of the theology of the period - an advanced text.

Radio

'The Nicene Creed' an episode of In Our Time (41'). The first ten minutes 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. Hosted by Melvyn Bragg, with Martin Palmer, Director of the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture; Caroline Humphress, Reader in History at Birkbeck College, University of London; Andrew Louth, Professor of Patristic and Byzantine Studies at University of Durham.

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

Videos (in order of increasing complexity of content, four of which have been embedded in the pre-session reading for participants)

1. **The Council of Nicaea in 5 Minutes.** In fact, this video lasts just over 4 minutes (because the last part concerns other things). Although in a cartoon format, it manages to convey a lot of important information in a digestible way.



2. **The Significance of Nicaea** - a short (4.5 minute) and accessible introduction by Prof Jane Williams, Anglican academic, and Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury.



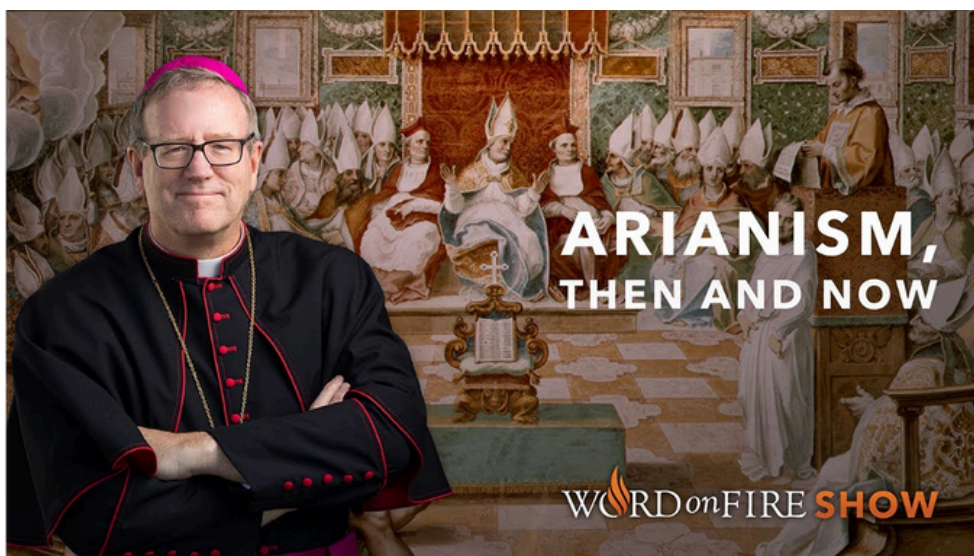
3. **Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea** (11 mins.) - particularly helpful in using a map and timeline to narrate the events of Nicaea.



4. **A History of Christianity - The First Christianity** (60 minutes). A beautifully produced BBC series, presented by renowned church historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch. He discusses the Council of Nicaea around 20 minutes into the programme.



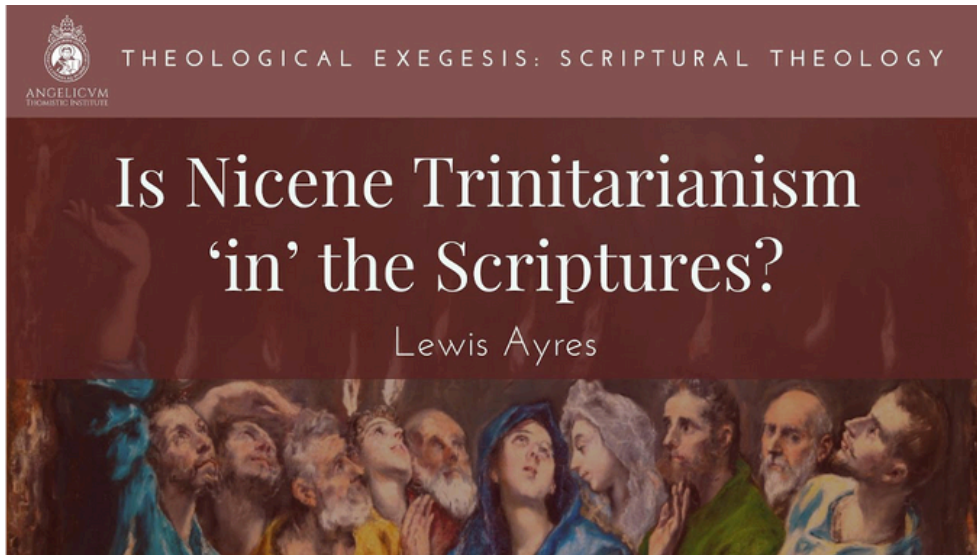
5. **Arianism, then and now** - a video lasting 30 minutes by a fine communicator, Roman Catholic bishop, Dr Robert Barron: a very lively account of why the Nicene Creed matters in the life of the Church.



6. **How the Nicene Creed expresses the Gospel** - a longer (63 mins.) and more detailed interview with American academic, Prof Philip Cary.



7. **Is Nicene Trinitarianism 'in' the Scriptures?** A scholarly lecture (57 mins.) by Prof. Lewis Ayres (Durham University)



A Prayer

At the beginning of the sessions you may like to use this prayer of St Anselm (Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109), who spoke of the close relationship between faith and human reason in his motto, 'faith seeking understanding', meaning something like 'an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.'^[1] This is a nice summary of what we are trying to do on this course.

My prayer is a cold, little thing, Lord, because it burns with so faint a flame. But you are rich in mercy. As your kindness is above all human love, so let your eagerness to hear be greater than what I feel when I pray.

Lord, I am not trying to reach your height, for my poor mind could not even approach it. But I do want to understand the little of your truth which my heart already believes and loves. I do not seek to understand so that I may believe, but I believe so that I may understand; and further, I believe that unless I believe I shall never understand.

I have found a fullness of joy that is more than full. This joy fills the whole heart, mind, and soul; it fills the entire person, yet there remains more joy that is beyond measuring. God of truth, I ask that I may receive so that my joy may be full. Meanwhile, may my mind meditate on it, my tongue speak of it, my heart love it, my mouth proclaim it, my soul hunger for it, my flesh thirst for it, and my whole being desire it, until I enter into the joy of my Lord, who is God, triune unity, blessed forever.

You only are mighty, Lord; you only are merciful. Whatever you cause me to desire for my enemies, give it to them and give the same to me, and if what I ask for them is ever outside the rule of love, whether through weakness, ignorance, or malice, give it neither to them, good Lord, nor to me.
Amen.

[1] *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/>

Helpline

And finally, if you become stuck over an aspect of the course - perhaps there's something that's unclear to you in the pre-session reading, or someone asks a question in a session which you're unable to answer - you can email your question to Revd Dr Donald McFadyen who will do his best to help:

chaplain.stlukesfontainebleau@gmail.com

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Session 1
Setting the scene

Leader's Notes

Printing in advance: run off enough copies of the single sheet showing the two creeds side-by-side.

Introducing the course

Explain that this Lent course is a rare opportunity for us to look at a vital aspect of our Christian practice. The sessions are opportunities to explore, not to be told what to think. The more everyone participates, the richer the sessions will be.

When we're honest many of us are puzzled by what the creeds mean. Some of us have decided that there are parts of them we cannot believe. All of that is fine: these sessions are intended to be places of openness where no question is too simple to ask, no view is unspeakable. We learn best when we're talking together in an atmosphere of trust and respect.

By the end of this first session we may feel more confused than when we started. That's a good sign! We are 'stirring the pot', enabling questions to rise up, so that we can see what they are and look at them together. Try to assure people that, through these five sessions, the Creed may become more difficult to understand before it becomes easier, and that's natural.

The hope is that by the end participants will feel, 'I'll never say the Creed in the same way again.'

1) To get things going

Ask people, 'what is your understanding of the Nicene Creed? What does it mean to you? How do you feel about it? How does it affect your life in the church?'

Perhaps you grew up saying it as a child every Sunday in an Anglican setting, or in another church. Perhaps you've been reunited with it in another language, and that's brought you a different sort of understanding of it.

Tell your neighbour, and then come up with two words to describe your relationship to the Creed, and share them with the group.

Expect people to come up with all sorts of words, such as:

- Commitment
- Familiarity
- Belonging

- Partnership (with God)
- Unity (with other churches)
- Unity (despite people coming from different backgrounds)
- Belief
- Core of the church (makes a service 'proper')
- Old (and therefore precious)
- Comforting
- Reassurance (of the resurrection)
- Dense
- Relevant
- Central

Invite people to talk about the two words they've chosen, which will naturally trigger a discussion as people find they resonate with others' contributions.

2) Digging into the Creed

This is likely to be a free-flowing discussion, which enables people to find their voice, in a way they may never have had the opportunity to do before.

Hand out the sheet with the two creeds side-by-side, and explain that this is a just a first look at the words, which we'll keep returning to, section by section in the coming sessions. If people have been able to answer the three questions about the Creed in the pre-session reading, ask them how they found the experience. People will no doubt express how hard it is to understand at least some of what's written.

Assure participants that the words are indeed difficult, and that recognising that fact is the jumping off point for learning. What we're doing in this first session is trying to 'reverse engineer' the Creed, i.e. we're looking at the words they wrote down, and trying to discern the questions or issues about belief which they address.

Take the Creeds in sections, as separated by the dotted lines. The comments below are typical of what may emerge. Don't feel you need to answer all the questions raised, but instead see this as teasing out the key issues that we'll look at in the future sessions.

Chunk 1: 'One God'

The words in the second column are an expanded version of the first. What might be the reason to do this? Making explicit the One who lies behind all things.

Chunk 2: 'One Lord, Jesus Christ'

This is where the language becomes difficult: 'begotten' and 'only begotten' in the first column becomes 'eternally begotten' in the second column. What do these words mean here?

'Of one substance with the Father' in the first column becomes 'Of one being with the Father'. The word substance isn't found in the Bible - what might it mean? Is 'one being' any clearer?

'God from God, Light from Light' appear in both columns, and sound beautifully poetic but what are they telling us? How do Father and Son relate here?

There's more detail about Jesus' birth and death in the second column - why might that be? What does the first column miss out? Answer: any mention of Jesus' death.

Chunk 3: 'The Holy Spirit'

In the first column there is hardly anything about the Spirit, and only a little more in the second column. What might this tell us? What relationship between the Father and the Son does the Spirit have, according to the Creed? Answer: the Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, which is still a point of dispute in the Christian Church, as explained in the footnote.

Chunk 4: 'The Church'

The first column says nothing about the church, whilst the second says quite a lot. What's the significance of the words 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic'? (Many people mistake 'catholic', meaning universal, for 'Roman Catholic', a denomination within Christianity first distinguished from the Eastern Orthodox Church through the Great Schism of 1054.)

And finally.... anathematizes!

The first column ends with a very strong summary statement, saying the church anathematizes (meaning to curse or condemn) those who say certain things about 'the Son of God', including the three statements:

There was when He was not
 Before being born He was not
 He came into existence out of nothing

These are summary statements of what Arius, who we mentioned earlier in the session, believed about the person of Jesus Christ. They take us into the heart of the debate at Nicaea. And which we'll start to look at next time.

To end

Try to draw together some of the threads of the discussion. Then explain that the next three sessions will be looking at the three sections of the Nicene Creed already discussed:

Session 2 - One God, the Father, the Almighty
 Session 3 - One Lord, Jesus Christ - his divinity
 Session 4 - One Lord Jesus Christ - his humanity
 Session 5 - The Holy Spirit and the Church

Encourage people to read the material for Session 2, available on-line. The session will be much more fruitful if people can do this pre-session reading.

Finish with a prayer.

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Session Two
One God

Leader's Notes

1) To get things going

As we've said, the success of this Lent Course lies not in telling participants what to think, but in giving them the opportunity to discuss fundamental matters of Christian faith, so that they can come to understand better what they believe and why. So, give time at the start of this second session for participants to raise questions arising from their pre-session reading.

You might like to ask, 'What was the most thought-provoking part of the pre-session reading? What did you find difficult? Was there anything you found troubling?'

Remember, your role is not to know all the answers, but to know enough so that you can keep the debate on track. Discussions are probably at their best when they're a bit chaotic, because it's a sign that people are engaging with the topic. So, if it feels messy, don't worry!

2) Tackling monotheism

This session is about laying a foundation for the discussion about the Person of Jesus Christ. Try to keep in mind that the central points we're looking at:

- i) How is God to be identified as the 'one God' spoken of in the first line of the Nicene Creed?
- ii) How can Jesus be related to this 'one God' without threatening monotheism?

Here, then, we're looking at fundamental aspects of belief, which is probably something that few participants will have had the opportunity to do before. It may take a little while for people:

- to feel it's alright to ask such questions
- to see that there's a problem here in the first place
- to want to engage with such questions because they feel it's unsettling to their belief.

Nevertheless, encourage participants to express their response to these basic questions.

To anchor the discussion you have the handout with the Bible verses which were at the centre of the dispute between Arius and Athanasius. Read through the 'Christian liturgy' section together, to remind everyone that the idea of 'one God' is very familiar to us through the liturgy.

Then move on to the Bible verses, explaining that these are some of the key ones debated at Nicaea by Arius and Athanasius, who interpreted them differently. These differences were crucial

Leader's Notes: Session Two

in establishing orthodox Christian faith, and it's all too easy for us to read them unthinkingly. This session, however, gives us the space to do something different:

Taking each text in turn, but spend time especially on the first. Stop to look closely at what each says, encouraging participants to put themselves in the position of one of the bishops attending the Council of Nicaea, and asking themselves whether Arius has a point when he wants to see a separation between the 'one God' and the Person of Jesus? The point here is to try read the texts without prior assumptions, and to see that their meaning is not quite as straightforward as we might at first think. Or that, at the very least, Arius's reading of them is not unreasonable.

As you go through each of the five verses, participants may start to feel either a bit unsettled, because they see that what is written is not quite as clear as they thought it was.

Alternatively, they may feel that their own view of Jesus, that he was a fine teacher and moral example, but no more than that, is being confirmed. Either response at this stage is great! The main thing is that participants are engaging with the verses.

This session will inevitably leave people on a bit of a knife edge: which way will things go?

To end

As before, try to draw together some of the threads of the discussion.

Then explain that the next session will build on this one, and look in more detail at the Person of Christ, which takes up most of the Nicene Creed.

Again, encourage people to read the material for Session 3, available on-line. The session will be much more fruitful if people can do this pre-session reading.

End with a prayer.

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Session Three
'One Lord' - Definitely Divine

Leader's Notes

This is perhaps the most demanding of the five sessions, because the material is complex and strange to our ears. We're so used to accepting the beliefs about the person of Jesus Christ which we've inherited that we're not used to the sort of forensic approach that we find in the Nicene Creed. But this can be very exciting because in retracing the steps of the Nicene debate we can appreciate at a new depth the wonders of who God is and what God has done in sending Christ.

Because this section of the Creed is so long and significant, we're going to look at it over two sessions. In this third session we'll examine the words which relate to Jesus' divinity, and in the fourth session we'll consider his humanity.

Expect participants to have struggled to understand the phrases of the Creed concerning Christ's divinity. They are, of course, very familiar - we regularly recite them as part of the Creed - but this can make it all the harder to get our head around them because we think we ought know what they mean. So, part of your role as leader is to give space to people to think about them in the session, and then welcome any contribution which tries to explain what they might mean.

'Might mean' is important, because these phrases are attempts to pin down the truth about God, which is notoriously difficult because God is the great mystery in whom we delight. Here are the questions from the pre-session reading with some ideas to include in discussing them.

'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ'

We are used to hearing the word 'Lord' in church to speak about Jesus. Stop to think about it. Try to sit with it for a few minutes, and feel what the word means to you in your relationship with God.

QUESTION: What does the word 'Lord' mean to you, and what does it mean to those outside the church?

DISCUSSION: In human relationships the word Lord describes a person who has authority, control or power over us. Few of us, however, use the word 'Lord' except in relation to our faith. Of course, it is a vital word in the Bible, both in the Old Testament where it is used to identify and address God, and in the New Testament where it is applied to Jesus. Here are just three examples:

i) Jesus' birth

The 'angel of the Lord' addresses the shepherds, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you

good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.' (Luke 2.10-11)

ii) Post-resurrection appearance to the disciples

Thomas the disciple exclaims to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20. 28)

iii) The post-Pentecost preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles

Peter the disciple, addressing Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army, announces, 'Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all' (Acts 10. 36)

The title 'one Lord' in the Creed is therefore consistent with Scripture and deeply significant: it is ascribing divinity to Jesus Christ.

'Eternally begotten of the Father'

The word 'begotten' may sound slightly old fashioned to our ears, but we still hear it used. For example, if we say 'it is hoped that the King might beget an heir by his new Queen', we know that it is hoped that the King may bring a child into existence through a process of reproduction.

Here another of those differences of interpretation between Athanasius and Arius arises. Arius reasoned that if Jesus was 'begotten of the Father', then God the Father must have come before Jesus. Literally, Jesus was secondary. Logically we would agree: if a son comes from their father, their father must already exist.

Psalms 2.7 shows us that the idea of the King of God's people being 'begotten' of God does not arrive with Jesus; it is much older. Yet, the writers of the Creed wanted to say something more about this Son to differentiate him from the kings who had gone before him. So, they added the word 'eternally' so that Jesus is not just begotten but is 'eternally begotten' of the Father.

The phrase 'eternally begotten' is very strange, trying to express what ultimately has to be accepted as a mystery, the origins of Jesus Christ. Normally if you beget a child, it's an event that happens in the moment when the child is conceived. The word 'eternally' describes an action with no beginning or ending. Putting the two words together seems to make no sense.

QUESTION: What do you think the writers of the Nicene Creed were trying to convey in the phrase 'eternally begotten'?

DISCUSSION: Try to tease out from participants why this phrase is paradoxical, i.e. that 'eternally' and 'begotten' are, in normal usage, incompatible. There's something going on here to do with time and existence. The words are conveying that Jesus was indeed begotten of God the Father, but that this has been so forever. Unlike a human birth it did not have a beginning, it was simply always so: Jesus is the Son of the Father in eternity. This is how God is. To grasp this reality requires that we engage our imaginations and allow ourselves to think in a new way, to think about a divine reality. This divine reality doesn't map neatly onto our human experience, our experience as creatures who inhabit space and time.

Arius would not or could not open his mind to this possibility. For him, if Jesus was 'begotten of the Father' then he was inferior to God, was part of the created order - a creature of God - and there had therefore been a time when he did not exist. The phrase, 'Eternally begotten of the Father' is in the Nicene Creed to say the opposite. Significantly, the Appendix of the 'Creed of Nicaea' (the early version of the Nicene Creed which we looked at in Session 1) is even more explicit in refuting the beliefs of Arius and his supporters, saying they should be put out of the church:

And those who say 'There once was when He [Jesus] was not' and, 'Before being begotten He was not,' and 'He came into being out of nothing'....the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

To reinforce the point, see if people can identify verses in the Bible where Jesus talks of himself, or is spoken of, in ways claiming preexistence.

Two examples are:

i) The prologue of John's gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. **(John 1. 1-2)**

ii) Jesus talking of his relationship to the patriarch, Abraham:

Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.' **(John 8. 58)**

In this second example, in using the phrase 'I am' Jesus was deliberately referring back to the encounter Moses had with God in Exodus 3. There God speaks through a burning bush, and tells Moses that his name is, 'I AM WHO I AM.' Scholars have debated the meaning of this name ever since, but amongst other things it is conveying the eternal existence of God, and his faithful nature to be with his people. When Jesus used the same words, people were so clear that he was claiming divinity for himself, and thus committing blasphemy, that 'they picked up stones to throw at him'. **(John 8. 59)**

'God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God'

To our ears these words, too, are strange. We don't find the phrase 'God from God' in the Bible, nor 'Light from Light', nor 'true God from true God'. These phrases seem to be using words in a way that is half way between poetry and prose. Try simply to understand the words as conveying something relatively straightforward. And ask yourself once more, what did those who included them in the Creed wish to say?

QUESTION: At face value what do these three phrases say to you?

DISCUSSION: These phrases are more straightforward than those immediately before. They are affirming as clearly as possible that Jesus is indeed divine. Taking them in turn:

God from God

Whilst Jesus is not part of God's creation, neither does he have his origin apart from 'the one God': He is "God from God," which is to say, he is God the Son from God the Father. The

Son derives his being from the Father, in such a way that he is just as fully God as God the Father is - as a human son is just as fully human as his father is.'[1]

Light from Light

This phrase is obviously metaphorical, and perhaps picks up on another phrase describing Jesus in the book of Hebrews:

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being
(Hebrews 1.3)

True God from true God

Again this phrase echoes a verse of Scripture, which is part of a prayer of Jesus to the Father:

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. **(John 17. 3)**

'Begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.'

Three more phrases, familiar yet strange.

QUESTIONS:

In the first phrase, here again we have that word 'begotten', but used in a slightly different way to say 'The Son is this, and is not that'. What's being specified here?

In the second phrase we find an unusual word, 'Being'. What are the writers trying to tell us with this word?

The third phrase is a very clear statement relating to the making of things, i.e. the creation. How does this differ from what Arius maintained about Jesus' relationship to creation?

DISCUSSION:

Begotten, not made

Here we return to the word 'begotten', apparently to emphasise that Jesus is not part of all that God created but has instead existed forever. He is in a unique relationship to God, as God's one and only Son, and this has always been so. There never was a time when he did not exist, and a moment when he began to exist. Jesus has always existed. This distinguishes him from the rest of the creation which was indeed 'made'.

Of one Being with the Father

One of the strangest but most significant phrases in the Creed, what does this mean? Philip Cary explains its significance with helpful clarity:

The Son has every essential feature of divinity, and not some different kind of divinity than the Father. That is the sense [of 'of one Being'] that excluded Arius' teaching, as well as every other theology that subordinated the Son to the Father as if he were a secondary or lesser divine being.[2]

[1] Philip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction*, page 66

[2] *The Nicene Creed*: page 82

Leaders Notes: Session Three

Through him all things were made

From our earlier sessions we can see that these words emphasise again Jesus' involvement in creation, a distinctly divine attribute. Perhaps these words surprise us a little because we have fallen into the trap (which we'll explore further in Session 5) of associating God much more with the spiritual aspect of life than the physical. Accordingly we have taken less notice than we should have of the New Testament's insistence on Jesus' involvement in, and even him being the very reason for, the material world. Two verses which make this point clear:

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.
(John 1.3)

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. **(Colossians 1. 15-16)**

Hymnody

Verse 3 from Hymn to the Trinity by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, speaks of the Son. In the light of what you've discovered in this session, which words strike you?

God the Son by Love begotten,
 Loved from all eternity,
 Life outpoured for our salvation,
 Through whom all was brought to be,
 Perfect image of the Father,
 God from God, and Light from Light,
 Healing through our human weakness,
 For sin's blindness giving sight.

To end

The central message and teaching of this part of the Creed, which can be lost in its somewhat forensic formulation, is something beautiful which originates in love[3]:

The Father becomes Father - becomes himself - by eternally giving all that is his to the Son, as the Son becomes himself by eternally receiving all that he is from the Father. This is the power of divine love, the one love of God in which the Holy Spirit too fully participates, receiving all that he is and has from the Father, who is the source of all that is divine.[4]

Finish with a prayer.

[3] See also a lecture by Canon Dr Clare Amos (The Diocese in Europe's Director of Lay Discipleship and Ministry Experience Scheme) Discovering 'love' - unearthing the missing word in the Creeds: an ecumenical and interreligious exploration. Available directly from the author on request.

[4] Phillip Cary, The Nicene Creed: page 85-6

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Session Four
One Lord' - Wholly Human

Leader's Notes

1. Section of the Creed

After the very 'knotty' Session 3, this material is more straightforward. We're focussing on the life of Christ, as summarised in a number of terse statements. The value of this Session will lie in a variety of places:

- 1) Giving participants the opportunity to link these credal statements with the festivals of the Church. Often we see individual parts of the Church Year jigsaw without having the opportunity to put them together. Here people can see how the Church celebrates the seminal moments of Jesus' life, death and resurrection in the major festivals.
- 2) Being able to think about what 'salvation' means. It's a word which participants will be familiar with, but it's valuable to have time to consider it. Formally it concerns being saved (or delivered or redeemed) from sin and its consequences. Does this resonate with people? Do they see it as mainly to do with this life, or life after death?
- 3) Some of the statements about the life of Christ may present problems, most commonly concerning the Virgin Birth. Explore whether what we studied about Jesus' divinity in the last session sheds new light on this part of the Creed: does being 'eternally-begotten' help us understand why the Christmas birth narratives, in which 'the child conceived in [Mary] is from the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 1. 20) might make sense? Other statements that may be particularly thought provoking concern Jesus being seated (enthroned) by God's right hand, and its implications for Jesus' sovereignty; and the idea that Jesus will return as judge.

2. Liturgy

The piece of liturgy used in celebrating the Baptism of Christ is stark, but our study makes it comprehensible. It conveys the theological truth about what is happening at this crucial moment in Jesus' life: the Person of Christ ('the Uncreated') voluntarily submits to being baptised by a fellow human being from whom he is fundamentally different, his cousin John ('his own creature').

3. Hymnody

The verse from 'O come, all ye faithful' is instantly recognisable, but the words' meaning is deepened by studying the Creed. The discussion questions invite participants to think about the humanity of Christ as utterly real. He is not the 'hovercraft' Jesus, living six inches above the world we know, but lives fully within it, experiencing all its joys and pain. The Creed says nothing about Jesus' life between his birth and death, which means the church can struggle to see the significance of his life as a whole. What is its significance? A second century Greek bishop puts it this way: Jesus Christ is 'the living man',^[1] whose life reveals God's glory.

[1] Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book IV, chapter 20, para. 7

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Session Five
'The Holy Spirit' and 'The Church'

Leader's Notes

This final session of the course is slightly different, in that it focuses more on the practical implications of The Creed, and gives the opportunity for participants to reflect on the experience of the last five Sessions.

Prayer

Give participants the opportunity to talk about their experience of praying, as one of the primary gifts which the Holy Spirit gives us, as discussed by Bishop Tom Wright in his video.

Unity in the Church

In the Diocese in Europe our chaplaincies have many opportunities to meet, work and worship with members of other Christian Churches, all of whom share the Nicene Creed. Encourage participants to speak of their experiences.

Ecology and Incarnation

Recently the Church has woken up to its obligation to care for creation, which can be traced back to the Nicene Creed. Help participants to make the connection between the Creed and ethics, concerning care of creation and also care of neighbour.

Looking back...looking forward

Take some time to reflect on this experience of doing this Lent Course together, and the difference it's made to participants' understanding.

As we look forward to Holy Week and Easter, the final verse of Bishop Geoffrey Rowell's hymn expresses something of the joy which the belief expressed in the Creed creates in us:

Triune God we bring our praises,
 Low in adoration fall,
 Awesome Wonder that amazes
 As our hearts now hear your call,
 'Share in me the life of glory,
 Lives transfigured by my Love!
 Saints on earth and saints in heaven,
 In the Trinity above.

Spend some time looking at and enjoying the words.

End with a prayer.