



**Diocese
in Europe**

A Lent Course

Celebrating Nicaea:
seeing afresh the faith which holds us together



Nicene Creed
Celebrations 2025

The full course



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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.



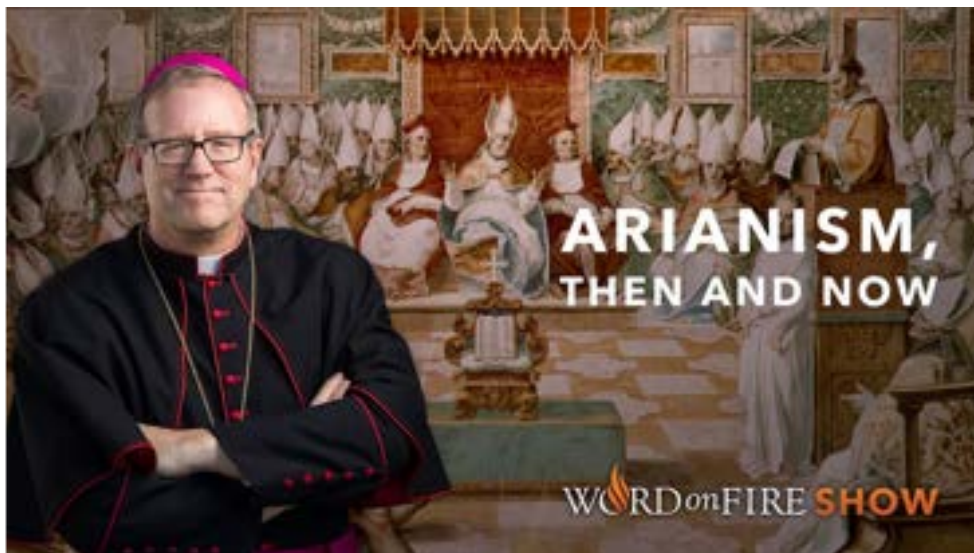
3. **Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea** (11 mins.) - particularly helpful in using a map and timeline to narrate the events of Nicaea.



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.



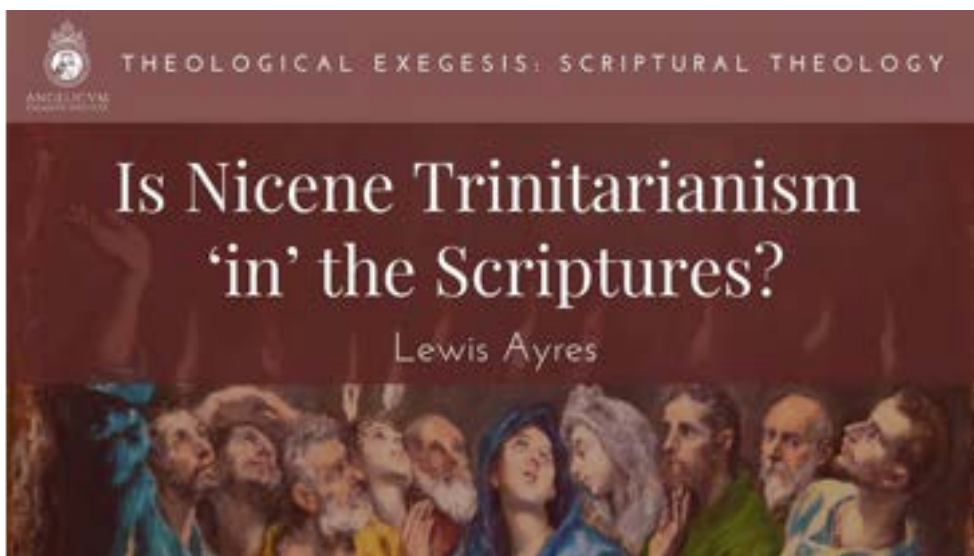
5. **Arianism, then and now** - a video lasting 30 minutes by a fine communicator, Roman Catholic bishop, Dr Robert Barron: a very lively account of why the Nicene Creed matters in the life of the Church.



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

A Lent Course
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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 1
Setting the Scene

Handout

On the next two pages you'll find material to look at in the session.

First, the text of the Creed which emerged from the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, which here we call 'The Creed of Nicaea', set out side-side with the text of the Creed which emerged from a later Council, held in Constantinople fifty-five years later, which is 'The Nicene Creed' which we say in church..

When comparing the two texts it becomes clear that the second is an expanded version of the first. Dotted lines separate the different sections to make it easier to compare them.

Second, the words of a hymn composed by a previous Bishop in Europe, Geoffrey Rowell. Its words are theologically rich, and owe a debt to The Nicene Creed. We'll therefore be looking at them, verse by verse, in the coming weeks. We're also invited to sing it in our chaplaincies on Trinity Sunday, 15th June. This week, look at verse 1, and see if anything particularly strikes you.



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**The Creed of Nicaea
 from First Council of Nicaea (325)**

We believe in One God,
 Father, Almighty,
 the Maker of all things visible and invisible.

.....
 And in One Lord Jesus Christ,
 the Son of God,
 begotten from the Father, Only-begotten,
 that is from the substance of the Father;
 God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten not made,
 consubstantial with the Father,
 by whom all things were made,
 both things in heaven and things on earth;
 who for us men and for our salvation came down,

and was incarnate, was made man, suffered,

and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven,

and is coming to judge living and dead.

.....

And in the Holy Spirit.

.....

Appendix

And those who say 'There once was when He was not' and, 'Before being begotten He was not,' and 'He came into being out of nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'from another hypostasis or substance', or 'created', or 'alterable', or 'mutable', the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

**The Nicene Creed
 from First Council of Constantinople (381)**

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

.....
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 the only Son of God,
 eternally begotten of the Father,

God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father;
 through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven;
 was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
 and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
 he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
 in accordance with the Scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the
 dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.

.....

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]*,
 who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
 glorified,
 who has spoken through the prophets.

.....

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
 sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
 and the life of the world to come. Amen.

.....

[*the words 'and the Son' (known as the filioque clause, filioque meaning 'and the Son' in Latin) were a later addition to the Creed, which caused great distress to the Eastern Orthodox churches, because of the way it was done. We explore this further in Session 5]

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Hymn to the Trinity
Bishop Geoffrey Rowell

To the tune of Abbot's Leigh ('Glorious things of thee are spoken') or Blaenwern ('Love divine') or Hyfrydol ('Alleluia, sing to Jesus') or Lux Eoi ('Alleluia! Alleluia! Hearts to heaven and voices raised')

Light of light, Love's radiant Glory,
 Blessed Trinity adored!
 Well of life, our shaping story,
 Source of beauty, life outpoured!
 As in heav'n the angels worship,
 'Holy, Holy, Holy!' sing,
 Let us now their praises echo,
 And our lives in homage bring.

God the Father, first Beginning,
 Fountainhead of life and grace,
 Love eternal, all-creating,
 Energising time and space,
 Seen in all creation's beauty,
 Fragile flowers and stars above,
 Particles whose hidden myst'ry
 Praise your all-creative love.

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.

Holy and life-giving Spirit,
 Bond of love, God's living Breath,
 Presence which the Church inherits,
 Raising us to life from death;
 Drawing us to deep communion,
 Kindling in our hearts desire -
 Longing prayer for perfect union,
 Tears of joy and tongues of fire!

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.

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Session 1: Setting the scene

Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Introduction to this Lent 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 a vital 'staging post' on the journey towards Christian unity.

In 325 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 this diocese. Over the coming 12 months we will explore in a number of ways the importance of the Council of Nicaea for 21st century Anglicans.

Watch:

The Significance of Nicaea - a short (4'30") and accessible introduction by Prof Jane Williams, Anglican academic, and Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Here two renowned Anglican theologians speak in an accessible way about the Nicene Creed, helping to set the scene for what it to come in the course.



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Listen:

'The Nicene Creed' - an episode of In Our Time, broadcast in 2007. The whole programme lasts 41 minutes, but you could listen to just the first ten minutes which 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.)

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

The first minute of the programme serves as a clear introduction:

'We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.'

Thus begins the Nicene Creed, a statement of essential faith spoken for over 1600 years in Christian churches: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. But what's become a universal statement was written for a very particular purpose: to defeat a 4th century theological heresy called Arianism, and to establish that Jesus Christ was, indeed, God. The story of the Creed is in many ways the story of early Christianity, a philosophical theology and realpolitik. It changed the Church, it changed the Roman Empire, but that it has lasted for more than 1600 years would seem extraordinary to those who created it.

Leading question for this session

Creeds: what are they, why bother with them, how many are there?

What is a creed?

The word 'creed' comes from a Latin word *credo* meaning 'I believe and trust'. A creed is therefore a statement of that in which the Christian church believes and trusts. The reason we're thinking about the Nicene Creed in 2025 is that it is celebrating its 1700th anniversary, an early version of it having first been written down in the year AD325.

Why should we bother with the creeds as part of Christian believing? Two images might help us. First, if you think of your faith as being like looking down a footpath leading away from you across a large field, the creeds can be thought of as like the edges to that path which, by being clearly marked, enable you to see the path much further into the distance than if its edges were blurred. Or to use a nautical image, the creeds might be thought of as the handrails on the deck of a boat which in rough weather enable you to keep your feet planted on the deck.

In other words, the creeds help us to see further, more deeply, into our faith; and they help us to stand firm when our faith is challenged or tested, in a world which is constantly changing and throwing us off balance.

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How do the creeds relate to the Bible?

If there was no Bible, there would be no creeds. The Bible is the primary text of the church, and the creeds are condensed statements of belief, emerging from what the Bible says. However, what the Bible says is rarely straightforward. Very often its words are puzzling, if not enigmatic. Over the centuries members of the church have debated passionately about a range of things found in the Bible, from what happens to bread and wine at a service of holy communion, to, in our day, whether marriage should extend to same sex couples. Although as Christians the people involved in those debates share a belief that the Bible is the authoritative text for the church, they do interpret Scripture differently. These differences lead to heated debates, as we know in our own day, and it was the same in the first few hundred years of the church's life.

Those early debates concerned the most fundamental matters of Christian faith, such as how we can speak of Jesus Christ as both human and divine. The result of those debates were the creeds, which once and for all declared what was to be thought of as orthodox, from two Greek words *orthos*, meaning 'straight or right', and *doxa* meaning 'opinion.' Thus, whilst many of us might have assumed that the creeds resulted from a professor of theology, sitting calmly in their ivory tower, putting pen to paper and writing down what we should all believe, we would be quite wrong. The creeds in fact came about through a much messier, more dynamic and deeply human process in which the truth, as discerned by members of the church meeting together as a Council, emerged through fierce debate.

This course aims to help us in three ways:

1. To learn about the Nicene Creed, and the place of creeds more generally in the church's life and liturgy
2. To understand the meaning of the Nicene Creed. The words of the Creed are not straightforward and so they need to be explained.
3. To be inspired by the Nicene Creed. Deeper understanding of our faith is never for our sake 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.

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How many creeds are there?

There are three main creeds. Apart from the Nicene Creed, the two other best known are the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. You may be familiar with them.

The title 'Apostles' Creed' was first used c.390.[1] The creed is used especially at services of baptism and confirmation. In the early centuries of the Christian Church people who were preparing for baptism learned a short summary of what Christians believe. One version became accepted as the Apostles' Creed, because it was thought to include the essential teaching of the twelve apostles, Jesus' earliest followers. It was into that faith of the apostles that Christians were, and are, baptised:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 creator of heaven and earth.
 I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
 who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
 born of the Virgin Mary,
 suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried;
 he descended to the dead.
 On the third day he rose again;
 he ascended into heaven,
 he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
 and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body,
 and the life everlasting.
 Amen.

The Athanasian Creed is longer (so we won't put the whole of it here) and is very different to the other two, being written in the 5th century for the guidance of teachers. It includes 'damnatory' clauses, which make for alarming reading. As rendered in the Book of Common Prayer it begins,
 Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith.
 Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

Despite being totally unsuitable to include in liturgy and never intended for that purpose it has, nevertheless, found its way into those of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches, although it is rarely used today.

[1] 'Apostles' Creed, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church

A Lent Course

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

What happened at Nicaea, and what was at stake?

The Nicene Creed is the one most commonly used today in Christian churches. The circumstances leading up to its composition included a Roman Emperor who wanted to unify his empire by ensuring everyone in the churches in his empire was united, 'singing from the same hymn sheet', and church leaders who were arguing fiercely about what the church should believe about the person of Jesus Christ: what does it mean to speak of him as both divine and human?

The Emperor in question, Constantine, called the bishops to meet at his palace at Nicaea to resolve the argument. Known as the First Council of Nicaea, it was a kind of giant General Synod meeting, attended by some 300 bishops plus their staffs, bringing the total to between 1200-1900 people. They represented, in theory at least, the church in every part of the Roman Empire.

Many of those who met had suffered greatly for their faith under persecution. These had been launched by Constantine's predecessors as Emperor, culminating with Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. The church's experience of suffering, almost to the point of extinction, meant the stakes at Nicaea were very high: the faith which they debated had been literally a matter of life and death for many attending.

The bishops debated aggressively for over two months, and issued a form of words to sum up their conclusions. Although not identical to the Creed we say in our churches today as we've explained, it provided its template. We call this 'the Creed from Nicaea', which was added to and slightly amended to become, some sixty years later as we've already said, the 'Nicene Creed'.^[2]

Thus, the Nicene Creed emerged through a heady mixture of politics and theology.

In the coming weeks we'll learn about the views of two of the main theologians:

Arius, a 69-year-old priest who was leader of a Christian community in the area of Alexandria, Egypt. He may or may not have attended the Council, 'but there is no evidence that he took any part in the proceedings, and it seems unlikely.'^[3] The ideas contained in his teaching however, were central to the proceedings. Arius is what we might call today a populist.

Athanasius, a 27-year-old deacon-secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria.

They were reading the same Bible, but they came to different conclusions about what it was saying about Jesus in relation to God the Father.

[2] This helpful way of distinguishing the two creeds is given by Philip Cary in his book *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction*, on page 7

[3] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, page 90

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Next week we'll start to look in detail at the views of these two men. For now let's see if we can gain some clues firsthand about what was being debated by reading side-by-side the texts of the two creeds which emerged from the meeting in Nicaea and from the meeting in Constantinople some sixty years later. On the next page you'll see the two creeds set out side by side. Dotted lines separate the different sections to make it easier to compare them.

Read the words slowly and carefully. Ask yourself three questions:

1. What here is familiar to me in each, yet I realise I'm not clear about its meaning?
2. Which parts are difficult to make sense of because there are words I don't recognise?
3. Where do the two creeds differ from one another in what they say and don't say; are these clues about what was being debated?

Write down your answers to these questions, and bring them to the session, where you can discuss them with others.



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The Creed of Nicaea
from First Council of Nicaea (325)

We believe in One God,
Father, Almighty,
the Maker of all things visible and invisible.

.....
And in One Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
begotten from the Father, Only-begotten,
that is from the substance of the Father;
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
consubstantial with the Father,
by whom all things were made,
both things in heaven and things on earth;
who for us men and for our salvation came down,

and was incarnate, was made man, suffered,

and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven,

and is coming to judge living and dead.

.....

And in the Holy Spirit.

.....

Appendix

And those who say 'There once was when He was not' and, 'Before being begotten He was not,' and 'He came into being out of nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'from another hypostasis or substance', or 'created', or 'alterable', or 'mutable', the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

The Nicene Creed
from First Council of Constantinople (381)

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

.....
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,

God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the
dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

.....
We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]*,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

.....
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

.....

[*the words 'and the Son' (known as the filioque clause, filioque meaning 'and the Son' in Latin) were a later addition to the Creed, which caused great distress to the Eastern Orthodox churches, because of the way it was done. We explore this further in Session 5]

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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 2
`One God`

Handout

Christian liturgy

Talk of 'one God' is familiar to us, not just in the Nicene Creed but elsewhere in our worship. For example, in one of our liturgies we have the words:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said:

The first commandment is this:

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
 with all your soul, with all your mind,
 and with all your strength.'

The words beginning 'Hear, O Israel' come from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 4-5. Known in Judaism as the Sh'ma (Hebrew for 'Hear'), they are central to Jewish daily worship, and would have been said daily by Jesus. They remind the Jews that they belong to God ('our God') and that this God is the sole true God ('the only Lord'). So, our liturgy chimes with the first part of the Nicene Creed, and each reinforces the other.

Bible verses

There was a small number of verses that Arius focussed on in favour of his argument that Jesus could not be thought of in the same way, on the same level, as the 'one God'. Here are four of them, one from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament. Some of them will be more familiar to us than others.

Old Testament

Proverbs 8, verse 22-25

The Lord **created** me at the beginning of his work,
 the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was **set up**,
 at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was **brought forth**,
 when there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped,

before the hills, I was **brought forth**. (*Italics* added)

This is part of a long and beautiful chapter about Wisdom, the wisdom of God. Here divine Wisdom is depicted as a person - 'The Lord created me' - and was identified with the Word of God, the Logos, whom the church believes 'became flesh' in Jesus. However, there is a problem here, as

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Arius saw it. If we refer the words of these three verses to Jesus, then according to scripture he was 'created', 'set up', 'brought forth'. How are these words to be interpreted?

Arius inferred from the text that Jesus as the Son of God, the Logos, had a beginning - certainly before the earth, the depths, the springs, before the mountains and hills, and even before the time of the world (translated above as 'ages'); but he did have a beginning, and for this beginning of the Logos scripture uses not only the metaphor 'begetting' (which is common in the church) but also the term 'creation'.^[1]

Thus these verses from Proverbs lead Arius to the conclusion that Wisdom/the Logos/the Son of God cannot concern something about God made flesh, because God has no beginning. Instead, it must be about some great heavenly power becoming flesh. Thus, Arius concludes that 'the Logos was God's creature.'^[2]

New Testament

In the New Testament there are moments where Jesus apparently says he doesn't know what the Father knows, as in:

Matthew 24 verse 36

'But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'

Again, Arius believes that this opens up a separation between the 'one God' and Jesus, who is subordinate, not equal, to this God. The same is shown in another verse:

John 14. 28

'You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.'

Arius interprets this verse as clear evidence that Jesus doesn't see himself as being on the same 'level' as his Father.

1 Corinthians 15. 24

'Then comes the end, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.'

For Arius, this is another example of the New Testament making it clear that Jesus is subordinate to God. This idea of subordinationism is a key part of Arianism: if Jesus is subordinate to the Father, he must also be separate, and therefore not divine.

The different way in which these texts and others were interpreted was the focus of the debate at the Council of Nicaea.

[1] Dünzl, Franz A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church, London: T&T Clark, 2007, p. 43

[2] Young, Frances From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background, p. 62.

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Hymnody

Verse 2 from Hymn to the Trinity by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, speaks of the Father. In the light of what you've discovered in this session, which words strike you?

God the Father, first Beginning,
Fountainhead of life and grace,
Love eternal, all-creating,
Energising time and space,
Seen in all creation's beauty,
Fragile flowers and stars above,
Particles whose hidden mystr'y
Praise your all-creative love.

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Session Two
'One God'

Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Recap of Session 1

Last week we thought about the place of creeds in general in our church life, and the Nicene Creed in particular. We learned how creeds are the result of passionate debate, not cool contemplation, and how the Creed which came out of the Council of Nicaea was developed to become the Nicene Creed we say today.

By comparing the words of the two Creeds we started to notice what was being emphasised, and that some of the language was puzzling. This week we're going to start looking in detail at the sections of the Creed: over the next three sessions we'll examine what the creed says about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the fifth and final session we'll consider how the Nicene Creed opened the way for developing the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Leading question for this session

How can we identify the one true God?

The meaning of 'one God'

This week we're looking at first section of the Nicene Creed:

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

To understand the significance of these words we'll unearth their Jewish roots, which requires some hard mental work. We'll then meet two of the key characters who were present at the Council of Nicaea, Arius and Athanasius, and start to see how they differed in their understanding of 'One God'. Finally, we'll think about how this part of the Creed has found expression in our liturgy.

We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty

What might be the significance of believing in one God? Those two words are more significant than it might at first appear. They carry a range of meanings:

There is only one deity, as opposed to many deities. Rather than there being many gods, the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) declare there is only one: Judaism is monotheistic. This set it apart from the religion of the surrounding peoples who worshipped many gods, and were therefore polytheistic. Judaism sees this difference as the basis for godly behaviour and ethics:

The insistence that 'God is one' is more than a mathematical statement. It is a prerequisite for a religion that demands righteousness, not merely obedience. It enables us to claim that there are fixed standards of right and wrong. In a world of many gods, the issue is not 'what does God demand of me?' but "which god can best reward and protect me in exchange for my loyalty?" The revolutionary claim of monotheism is not only that God alone exists but that God summons us to freely choose what is good.[1]

This one deity is not broken up into sub-deities: God is a unity. God cannot be separated into parts, with a power struggle going on between those parts.

God is the all powerful creator. There is no other 'god' who can match God's power, which is shown first and foremost in the ordered creation, in both its spiritual and physical aspects. This creation was brought into being by God speaking ('Let there be light'). Unlike God, creation therefore had a beginning: unlike God, creation is not eternal.

God is not distant and unknowable: instead, God's deepest nature is to be in relationship with his people as 'Father', a name simultaneously respectful and intimate which is used sparingly of God in the Jewish Scriptures, and as the central form Jesus uses in addressing God, and which he teaches his followers to use.

As we've said, then, these ideas about 'one God' do not emerge solely from the New Testament; they are fundamental truths about God found first in the Jewish Scriptures. This is important for the debates at Nicaea, because it meant both Arius and Athanasius were treating the Jewish Scriptures as the source of authoritative writing about God on which they based their arguments. It's important to realise that the content of the New Testament we use today was not agreed in the west until AD 382: some New Testament writings were still being debated, meaning that reasoning from Jewish Scripture played a vital role in the Council. Arius and Athanasius came to different conclusions about God, and Jesus' relationship to God, but that was about the interpretation of the Bible, not whether the Bible was to be trusted.

That said, the Bible was not alone in saying that there was only one God. Most respectable philosophers agreed that there was 'one ultimate divine being.'[2] The problem concerning the Council of Nicaea was that introducing Jesus into the monotheistic religion of Judaism raised a crucial question: how can you believe in 'one God' and at the same time say Jesus is divine? Can you preserve monotheism without 'demoting' Jesus from his divine status? One side of the argument said 'No', the other side said 'Yes'.

Back to the Council of Nicaea

Last week we learned that two of the main characters at the Council were called Arius and Athanasius. They were both biblical scholars, so they drew on both the Old Testament and the New which they viewed as authoritative. They both believed, therefore, that what the church said

[1] Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001, page 69

[2] Francis Young, The Making of the Creeds', page 33

'about the person of Jesus Christ could not contradict what the Bible said about God. Monotheism had to be preserved: what was said about Jesus must not endanger the idea of 'one God'.

As we've said, it's also important to remember that at the time of the Council of Nicaea the precise content of the New Testament had not yet been agreed; that happened some years later. Nor were there yet any creeds. Instead, 'All the bishops at Nicaea would have understood their local 'baptismal' creed to be a sufficient definition of Christian belief and summary of the faith Scripture taught.'[3] So, the church didn't have an authorised and complete Bible, or the agreed statements of belief which we have today, both of which serve as 'touchstones' for what constitutes Christian faith. And there lay the problem which Constantine was determined to fix at Nicaea. Having become sole emperor only a year earlier, in 324, he wanted to promote 'Christianity as a unifying religion for the empire'[4], and this required stabilising an inherently unstable church.

The views of the two main characters

Arius was a priest in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. His preaching attracted a large following but his views were controversial, and were causing considerable disruption in the church. Strange though it may sound to us today, theological ideas were of great popular interest. Arius had a large following amongst the working classes of his day, and the spread of his ideas 'was stimulated by the composition of popular songs 'for the sea, for the mill, and for the road', suitably set to music.

A synod of Egyptian bishops eventually excommunicated Arius, who then toured the major Eastern sees building up support for himself.'[5] It was the havoc caused by the views of Arius and his supporters that made the Emperor Constantine decide he must intervene, and so he called the Council to meet in the imperial palace at Nicaea.

Athanasius is the other main character in the Nicene Creed story. He was much younger than Arius - in his late twenties at the time of the Council - and was not himself a bishop but rather a deacon and personal secretary to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria. It was in this capacity that Athanasius debated and opposed Arius. (Three years after Alexander died, Athanasius succeeded him as Bishop, and continued the work of opposing the ideas of Arius and his followers; the Council's decision couldn't stop the ideas being spread.)

The Ideas of Arius

What's most important for us is to understand Arius' views, for it's only then that we can properly understand the significance of the words of the Nicene Creed which were formulated in opposition to them. But we must remember that these views were based on the same Bible (remembering again that its content was not yet agreed to be the Bible we use today) as were the views of Athanasius: the texts were the same; what they thought they meant was different.

[3] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, page 85

[4] *Ibid.*, page 87

[5] Frances Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, London: SCM Press, 1983, p. 59

The difference between the views, however, may well lie in the extent to which they were willing to put aside their prior convictions of God when reading the Bible. In essence they concern the relationship of Jesus to the 'One God', in two respects:

First, Arius said that Jesus, although extraordinary in all of creation, is nevertheless part of creation. Thus, Arius can say, 'there was [a time] when he (the Son) was not.' For Arius, **Jesus is a creature of God.**

Second, it follows that for Arius Jesus was subordinate to God the Father, and therefore Jesus is not equal to God, is not divine.

In both these respects, Arius was challenging the teachings of Athanasius and many others in the church who said that the Bible in fact teaches that Jesus is sent by God and is himself eternal, so that there was never a time when he did not exist, and is divine in the same way as the Father is divine. Jesus is therefore our ultimate and reliable way of understanding and knowing God, and is to be worshipped. And all of this can be said without compromising monotheism.

Watch

Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea (11 mins.) This short video is particularly helpful because it uses a map and timeline to narrate the events surrounding the Council of Nicaea. Pause at the beginning to get your bearings, historically and geographically. At 3'40" the discussion focuses on Nicaea, and the vocabulary may become more familiar as it discusses the Nicene Creed. Remember, you're not going to be tested on what you've watched! Feel free to watch as much as you feel comfortable with, and then stop.



What we'll be doing together: This second session will give you the opportunity to discuss the way Arius interpreted a small number of verses from the Bible. These will be handed out at the session.

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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.

Psalm 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 3
'One Lord' - Definitely Divine

Handout

Sections of the Creed

'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?

'the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father'

The word 'begotten' may sound old fashioned to our ears, but we still hear it used occasionally. 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.

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

'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?

'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?

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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,
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Session Three
'One Lord' - Definitely Divine

Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Recap of Session 2

In the last session we looked at the first part of the creed which speaks of 'one God' (monotheism) who alone is God and is responsible for the creation of all reality. We learned that the theologian Arius believed that seeing Jesus as divine was incompatible with this notion of a single and supreme creator. We examined how he interpreted certain verses of the Bible in his teaching that Jesus is subordinate to the 'one God'.

In this third session we're going to look at the second and longest section of the Creed which speaks of Jesus' divinity and humanity. We'll take two sessions to look at this section, starting with Jesus' divinity.

Leading question for this session

What's at stake here - if Jesus is not divine in the same way as 'God, the Father, the Almighty' does it matter?

Watch

[A History of Christianity - The First Christianity](#) (60 minutes). Episode 1 of a BBC series, presented by renowned church historian, Diarmaid MacCulloch. You don't need to watch the whole programme (although it's beautifully produced and very interesting) as the discussion of the Council of Nicaea starts around 20 minutes (20'42") lasts about 10 minutes (until 30'05"). It gives you a flavour of the geography, people and history of the region, thus humanising what could be in danger of being simply a complicated idea. Prof MacCulloch uses helpful illustrations to explain the oneness of Christ in being the God-man.



'One Lord' - definitely divine

So, we're starting to look at the second and largest 'chunk' of the Nicene Creed, the first part of which says:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 the only Son of God,
 eternally begotten of the Father,
 God from God, Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father;
 through him all things were made.

As you probably noted down in your preparation for Session 1, some of these words and phrases are strange and puzzling. They are in the Creed as a rebuttal of what Arius and his supporters were saying. The writers of the Creed want to secure an understanding of Jesus which they believe is true to what the whole Bible is saying. We may feel that, looked at individually, Arius's interpretation of certain Bible verses makes sense, but it's a bit like the proverbial "not being able to see the wood for trees": he misses the central truth of it all.

That truth, which the writers of these statements were trying to capture, can be summarised in the words of the titles of the next two sessions: Jesus is both wholly human & definitely divine. The language the Creed writers use may seem alien to us, and often different to the language of the Bible, but that's for a good reason: they were trying to express the inexpressible, and this was the best way they could find to do it. Interestingly, the fact that we're still saying these words suggests they did a good job; so far no one has been able to improve on them.

First, then, the words concerning Christ's divinity. After each phrase from the creed there is a question for you to think about, which you will have the opportunity to discuss in your group.

Part one: Definitely Divine

Let's consider four of the key phrases used of Jesus:

'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?

'The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father'

The word 'begotten' may sound old fashioned to our ears, but we still hear it used occasionally. 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.

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

'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?

'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?

All of these words used of Jesus in the Nicene Creed carry great significance, even if they are difficult to understand. Please come to the session ready to share both your insights and your questions. The more we can openly share both, the richer our conversation will be.

A final thought: 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^[1]:

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.^[2]

If you have time, a little bit more on 'begotten'

The word 'begotten', although used less today's English translations of the Bible than in older ones, is found in both the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) and the New Testament. Even in a modern translation it can still appear:

In Psalm 2.7, a so-called 'royal psalm' the following words are spoken to the King of Judah:
He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'

In Acts 13. 32-33 these same words are referred to Jesus:

**And we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm,
 "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."**

[1] 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.

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

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.

Psalm 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.

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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 4
'One Lord' - Wholly Human

Handout

1. **Sections of the Creed**

**For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.**

**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.**

**On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven**

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

QUESTIONS:

1. How do you think the two parts of this section of the Creed - concerning Christ's divinity and humanity - fit together? Does the second part make more sense in the light of the first?
2. What does 'For us and for our salvation' mean to you?

CHRISTMAS DAY (First major festival)

**'he came down from heaven;
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.'**

Good Friday

**'For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.'**

EASTER DAY (Second but greatest of the major festivals)

**'On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures'**

ASCENSION DAY (Third major festival)

**'he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.'**

Advent

**He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

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QUESTIONS:

1. Some people struggle to say some of these statements, for example that Christ 'was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary', because they say they don't believe in the Virgin Birth. Do you struggle to say any of these statements of the Creed, and if so, can you say why?
2. Which of the festivals means the most to you?

2) Liturgy

In the liturgy of a service to celebrate the Baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the River Jordan (The First Sunday of Epiphany) we find the words:

Today the Uncreated of his own will
accepts the laying on of hands from his own creature.[1]

These lines sounds complicated, but does our study of the Creed in the last two sessions help you to understand them? Can you see its connection to parts of the Creed we've been looking at over the last two weeks?

3. Hymnody

Bishop Robert Innes (Diocese in Europe) has recently reminded us[2] of the link between The Nicene Creed and the Christmas carol. 'O come, all ye faithful':

God of God, Light of Light,
Lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb;
Very God
Begotten, not created.
O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord!

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

1. Can you trace these words back to the Nicene Creed?
2. What difference does studying them make to the way you'll sing them at Christmas?
3. How has studying this section of the Creed changed the way you understand the Person of Jesus, and the significance of his life?
4. What does Christ being human mean to you? Do you behave differently as a Christian because of your understanding of Christ's humanity?

[1] Common Worship: Times and Seasons - Epiphany, A Service for the Festival of the Baptism of Christ: The Christ is Revealed in the Waters of Baptism

[2] Rt Revd Dr Robert Innes, Ad Clerum, Epiphany 2025

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Session Four
'One Lord' - Wholly Human

Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Recap of Session 3

In the last session we looked at part one of the long section of the Creed on Jesus as the 'One Lord' which talks of his divinity. We saw how the teaching of Arius, who wanted to preserve what he understood 'one God' to mean by limiting Christ to being a creature of God rather than attribute divinity to him, was robustly refuted in clear statements in the Creed.

Leading question for this session

Who must Jesus be if he is to save the world?

'One Lord' - wholly human

In this session we move to the second part of the Creed about the person of Christ, which speaks of his earthly life:

For us and for our salvation

he came down from heaven;

**was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.**

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again

in accordance with the Scriptures;

he ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,

and his kingdom will have no end.

'For us and for our salvation'

In this section the Creed seems to 'change gear' and become personal. No longer are we reciting mysterious truths about what it means to be divine. Now we are talking of what has been done 'For us' and 'for our salvation'. This phrase can be seen as the crucial 'hinge' of the creed. Before it comes the affirmation of Christ's divinity. After it comes the biography relating to his humanity. Each needs the other: Christ's humanity has the power to save us only because of his divinity.

Let's think about that a little more: on the one side of the hinge, if Christ had been only a creature of God, like any other human being, he would have been in the same sinful state as the rest of us. One part of creation is not able to save another part of creation. Only if Christ is 'above' creation can he do so. On the other side of the hinge, Christ can only save the world if he comes to earth as a human being. Salvation cannot be achieved without Jesus Christ

leaving heaven and becoming 'flesh' (John 1. 14). Hence, a fourth century theologian could write, 'What has not been assumed has not been healed'[1]. In other words, Christ truly assumed a human nature; he didn't just appear to be human, he was a true human being.

Bishop Robert Innes (Diocese in Europe) has recently explained this more fully:

"The audacious claim of the gospels is that, in Christ, God himself enters the human situation. Through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, humanity is given a new start with God. We can be healed from the radically damaging effects of sin and ultimately liberated from death into eternal life with our Creator.

Over the course of the first four centuries of the Church's life 'orthodox' teachers of the faith were clear that since God created human life, only God could save human life, and that only by assuming human flesh could God save humanity. There was seen to be an intimate connection between the person and nature of Christ and the realm of human salvation."

QUESTION TO DISCUSS:

1. How do you think the two parts of this section of the Creed - concerning Christ's divinity and humanity - fit together? Does the second part make more sense in the light of the first?
2. What does 'For us and for our salvation' mean to you?

Significantly, the statements in the Creed which follow these first two lines summarise the events marked by festivals and fasts in the church year:

CHRISTMAS DAY (First major festival)

'he came down from heaven;
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.'

Good Friday

'For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.'

EASTER DAY (Second but greatest of the major festivals)

'On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures'

ASCENSION DAY (Third major festival)

'he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.'

Advent

'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.'

[1] St Gregory Nazianzus, Letter to Cledonius (101)

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

1. Some people struggle to say some of these statements, for example that Christ 'was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary', because they say they don't believe in the Virgin Birth. Do you struggle to say any of the statements in this section of the Creed?
2. Look again at the preparation notes for Session 1, and the two creeds put side-by-side. Notice that the Creed of Nicaea (325) and the Nicene Creed (381) differ in a crucial respect: the first doesn't actually state that Jesus died. Why does his death matter?

Putting the two parts together

As we've seen, the section of the Nicene Creed on Jesus Christ is the longest. Its two parts speak of his divinity and his humanity. As we draw our discussion of this section to a close, looking back we can see that Arius brought to his reading of Scripture certain philosophical presuppositions about God - specifically what 'God is one' means - to the Bible rather than allowing the Bible to refashion any prior ideas about God: 'Arius inherits both a logical technique and a kind of cosmology, a picture of the universe, which, if you like, prevents him from reading the New Testament quite as radically and freshly as he could have done.'^[2] The Council of Nicaea declared Arius and his supporters unorthodox, and that they should be put out of the church (even if it took a long time to put into practice).

Watch: The Council of Nicaea in 5 Minutes. In fact, this video lasts just over 4 minutes. Although in a cartoon format, it manages to convey a lot of important information in a digestible way, and is a helpful way of summarising much of what we've been thinking about.



[2] Rowan Williams in 'Arius: heresy and Tradition', Interviewed on July 22nd, 2013:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJdbKI-uNCo&t=8s>

The church embraced Athanasius's argument that Jesus was fully God and fully human, and that this did not compromise monotheism. Perhaps we should not, however, demonise Arius; some academics believe the church owes him a great deal for asking the difficult questions, for refusing simply to accept the words of Scripture without thinking deeply about their implications, and pushing the wider church to do the same.

This wrestling with what we find in the Bible is the task of what the church calls theology. You may not have thought of yourself as 'doing theology' before, but that's what this course is inviting you to engage in. It's hard mental work, and can be unsettling. Rowan Williams says Nicaea helps us to understand why it's vital work if the church is to engage at the deepest level with what the Bible claims:

'There is a sense in which Nicaea and its aftermath represent a recognition by the Church at large that theology is not only legitimate but necessary. The loyal and uncritical repetition of formulae is seen to be inadequate as a means of securing continuity at anything more than a formal level; Scripture and tradition require to be read in a way that brings out their strangeness, their non-obvious and non-contemporary qualities, in order that they be read both freshly and truthfully from one generation to another. They need to be made more difficult before we can accurately grasp their simplicities. Otherwise, we read with eyes not our own and think them through with minds not our own; the 'deposit of faith' does not really come into contact with ourselves. And this 'making difficult', this confession that what the gospel says in Scripture and tradition does not instantly and effortlessly make sense, is perhaps one of the most fundamental tasks for theology.'^[3]

So, if you're finding this course challenging, it's because you're doing the good thing which Rowan Williams is talking about: more than loyally and uncritically repeating the words of the Nicene Creed, and instead allowing the words to become more difficult by thinking hard about what they mean, so that you can recite them 'freshly and truthfully'. This is 'doing theology'.

Why does any of this matter?

Ultimately why does it matter that the Council of Nicaea endorsed Athanasius's views and not those of Arius - what's at stake? It matters because in the Nicene Creed we are saying that what we see in the life and ministry of Jesus is nothing less than the life and mission of God on earth. The life of Jesus can be depended on completely to reveal God to us.

Thus, during Epiphany ('manifestation') we are remembering that God shows himself to the world in Jesus the Son. If Jesus is not eternal, did not exist before creation, he cannot do this.

Rowan Williams puts it this way:

'To talk about the Word of God made flesh in Jesus being of the same substance, the same nature as the Father is to say this is all the work of one God. So, that gives us as Christians a profound confidence that's what's going on in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus really is the work of the creator of the world. We can depend on the creator to do the job of recreating, remaking us, bringing us back where we ought to be in his purpose.'^[4]

^[3] Williams. Rowan Arius: Heresy and Tradition (Revised edition), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co.; 2002, page 236

^[4] The Significance of Nicaea, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yFpl5AnccM&t=2s

Finally, another former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, captures the essence of Nicaea's legacy in a memorable phrase. Amending the verse from Scripture which says: 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1. 5), he writes, 'God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.' [5]

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS:

1. How has studying this section of the Creed changed the way you understand the person of Jesus, and the significance of his life?
2. What does Christ being human mean to you? Do you behave differently as a Christian because of your understanding of Christ's humanity?

[5] God, Christ and the World: a study in contemporary theology (1969)

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

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.

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Session 5
'The Holy Spirit' & 'The Church'

Handout

The Holy Spirit

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

When you hear the words Holy Spirit, what do you think of?

Do you think it's important that the Spirit is mentioned in the Creed; what difference would it make if the Spirit wasn't mentioned?

The Church

**We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

What makes the 4 'marks' of the Church so important?

- one** there is only one Christian Church, with one head, Jesus Christ from whom it derives.
- holy** the church is set apart for Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (although clearly imperfect)
- catholic** a word meaning 'universal' (not to be confused with Roman Catholic, a part of the universal Church)
- apostolic** the church comes through the apostles, the earliest Christians.

Hymnody

Verse 4 from Hymn to the Trinity by Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, speaks of the Spirit and the Church. In the light of what you've discovered in this session, which words strike you?

Holy and life-giving Spirit,
Bond of love, God's living Breath,
Presence which the Church inherits,
Raising us to life from death;
Drawing us to deep communion,
Kindling in our hearts desire -
Longing prayer for perfect union,
Tears of joy and tongues of fire!

A Lent Course
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seeing afresh the faith which holds us together

Looking back...looking forward

In the very first Session of this course you were asked:

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?'

3 questions:

1) As we come to the end of the course, how has your understanding of the Creed changed?

2) Which parts of the Creed have surprised you?

3) Are you already saying the Creed in a new way?

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,
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Session Five
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Participants' Pre-Session Preparation

Recap of Session 4

Last week we were thinking about Jesus being 'wholly human', and the significance of his coming to earth as a human being. We recognised that the idea of 'salvation' rested on this event; only by becoming as we are could Jesus redeem the world. We linked the events of Jesus' life narrated in the Creed to the festivals of the Church.

In this final session we look at the remaining two parts of the Creed concerning the Holy Spirit and the Church. We're familiar with Pentecost as the day on which we celebrate the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples but this, the fourth major festival, is sometimes also called the birthday of the Church. It's fitting, therefore, that we look at the Holy Spirit and the Church together.

Leading question for this session

What difference does the Nicene Creed make to how we live as Christians?

The Holy Spirit

You'll have noticed that the Creed from Nicaea (325) ends abruptly with the words 'And in the Holy Spirit.' This tells us that the the third Person of the Trinity was not central to the Council's debate, whose main concern was the person of Christ. When the The Nicene Creed was finalised in 381 the writers affirmed the fully divine nature of the Spirit:

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father [and the Son],
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

Filioque Clause

The clause 'who proceeds from the Father' was inspired by a verse from the New Testament:
When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. **(John 15. 26)**

Later, however, 'unknown Latin apologists in 6th-century Spain (probably determined to defend Trinitarian orthodoxy in the face of a renewed Arian apologetic) added the term 'and from the Son.' [1] Ever since, this addition has caused problems in the worldwide church.

[1] 'Filioque' in The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought

Bishop Robert Innes suggests this anniversary year of the Nicene Creed gives an opportunity to repair relationships, and offers a specific liturgical way of doing so:

'In terms of church liturgy, 2025 is an opportunity to consider dropping the 'filioque' clause from our versions of the creed. Added by the Western Church sometime in the 6th century, this clause has been a source of aggravation, sometimes serious, to Eastern Orthodoxy both because of the unilateral manner in which the clause was added and because of its allegedly misleading theological significance. [2]

WATCH: One of the most fundamental practices all Christians share is prayer. In this short (2'40") video Bishop Tom Wright talks about Jesus' teaching on prayer in Luke 11, and the role of the Holy Spirit.



QUESTION: What do you feel happens when you are praying - is it just you, or do you believe the Holy Spirit has a role?

Tom Wright refers to **Luke 11. 11-13**, where Jesus says,

'Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'

Do you believe God the Father gives the Holy Spirit to people today? To you?

[2] Ad Clerum, Epiphany 2025.

The Church

Another noticeable difference between the Creed of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed is that the former says nothing at all about the Church, whereas the second adds:

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

A few explanatory words about the four important 'marks' of the church:

- one** there is only one Christian Church, with one head, Jesus Christ from whom it derives.
- holy** the church is set apart for Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (although clearly imperfect)
- catholic** a word meaning 'universal' (not to be confused with Roman Catholic, a part of the universal Church)
- apostolic** the church comes through the apostles, the earliest Christians.

The wider implications of The Council of Nicaea

i) Unity

The Creed has a significant role to play in the ongoing unity of the church:

First, the Creed came about as a result of people meeting together. It's all too easy to overlook the fact that the church 'happens' as people meet together as a 'spiritual society'. The Council of Nicaea in itself serves as inspiration for us: we must not give up on meeting each other in order to find the truth, even, and perhaps especially, in the face of fierce disagreement.

Second, on a global scale the Church today finds its unity around the Creed. Thus, this year is being celebrated as its 1700th anniversary, not just by the Anglican Communion, but Christian Churches in both the East and the West, who will also celebrate Easter on the same Sunday.

Third, on a more local level it's easy for us to forget that we are part of something bigger than our chaplaincy. The Creed helps us to remember that we are part of the Diocese in Europe, which in turn is part of the Church of England, which is a member of the Anglican Communion, which is part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

ii) Nicene Ethics: Ecology and Incarnation

It's often illuminative to contrast Christian belief with another belief system in order to show how radical it is. As Christianity was emerging, so was something called Gnosticism.

Gnosticism held that all material creation was spoiled by the Fall, and human beings goal is to try to escape it. The One Holy God can have nothing to do with this material world. Nicene Christianity says the opposite: God chose to come and live within his creation, in the form of his Son, the Word made flesh, in order to save it. God did not send a created being, but God himself in the form of Christ.

In so doing, God gives the material creation a renewed significance as 'good' (the word used in the creation story no less than six times (Genesis 1. 4, 10, 12,18, 21,25; in verse 31 God summarises his work as 'very good'). Nicaea affirmed that God's commitment to the material world is so great that God is willing to send his Son to die for it. Ultimately, the hope of Christian faith is not that God was forced to come down to our level, but that God chooses to redeem and raise us and all creation to his. True spiritual understanding means that material creation is not to be escaped, but fully inhabited.

This Nicene faith, therefore, has far-reaching implications for ethics, the way we live in the world: our relationships with other people, and with our material surroundings. God becoming a human being in Christ shows us what made in the image of God truly looks like, and makes sense of Christ's enigmatic teaching in Matthew 25. 35-40, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' We should treat every person as part of God's family, especially the strange; in each other we encounter Christ himself. The way we treat our material world is likewise profoundly affected, as we come to see our world as created by God for us to look after, not as an endless resource to consume.

WATCH: This short (5-minute) video introducing A Rocha, an organisation involved in caring for creation, founded in Portugal in 1983 (A Rocha means 'the rock' in Portuguese), with its Director of Theology, Dave Bookless.



Rupert Shortt, in his article 'Why the eclipse of Christianity matters', writes that the Creed serves as an ethical guide for Western societies:

Wherever Christians look, whether inside or outside the visible Church, they are likely to find evidence of divine gift, and should thus identify the "other", especially the outsider, as bearing God to them. The Creed, therefore, provides the strongest available foundations for values including the sanctity of life, the dignity of the individual, and human responsibility for the environment.[3]

Hymnody

The fourth verse of 'Hymn to the Trinity' focuses on this final part of the Creed, concerning the Spirit and the Church:

Holy and life-giving Spirit,
 Bond of love, God's living Breath,
 Presence which the Church inherits,
 Raising us to life from death;
 Drawing us to deep communion,
 Kindling in our hearts desire -
 Longing prayer for perfect union,
 Tears of joy and tongues of fire!

[3] Church Times, 15th September 2024