

Sunday 9th June – 1st Sermon on the Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty

Genesis 1,2

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 14:8-14

Did you used to watch the TV sitcom one foot in the grave? If so I am sure you can recall Victor Meldrew's catch phrase "I don't believe it"

Today we begin our series of sermons which will take us through the summer looking at what we do believe. And in particular what we are saying we believe when we recite the Nicene Creed – which begins with We believe ... (the statement of faith we say most Sundays). Why is this important? Because what we believe affects our actions and our attitudes. It helps to make us into the person we are. We are who we are because of what we believe.

The Nicene Creed has been used by Christians for more than 1500 years. It evolved through various councils (including the Council of Nicaea from where it got its name) in the 300's and its main purpose was to eradicate heresies. In Church of England liturgy we use it most weeks to summarise what we believe in – but what does it actually mean – for our belief and for our practice. How does it affect the way we live out our lives as Christians. Do we have to understand it in detail – and if we don't does that make us any less a Christian?

There are two creeds, two of these statements of faith, that we often use in Church – the Nicene creed that we use most weeks in our communion services, and the Apostles Creed, often used in Morning Worship. They say much the same thing – though the Nicene creed talks more about the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, while the apostles creed refers to Jesus descending into hell. They were both written to address particular issues of difference as the Christian faith developed and spread.

And today we are looking at the opening phrase of the Nicene creed "**We Believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty**"

The first thing this phrase says is that there is one God – God is unique. This reflects the first of the ten commandments - *I am the Lord your God -you shall have no other Gods before me.*

For us that probably doesn't sound so strange – we have been brought up with the concept of one God. Ours is what we call a monotheistic faith – believing in one God. We stress this time and time again when we preach on the Trinity. There is one God

who is revealed in three ways. Father Son and Spirit; or Creator Redeemer and Sustainer.

But I wonder – do we sometimes put other things before God. Treat other things as if they were equal with God or even more important than God. Family, status, career, money, possessions, reputation. The one God statement is saying we need to look at our priorities. Have we – maybe consciously or unconsciously - replaced the one true God with other things? Is there something else we worship before God?

So our first statement about God stresses God's uniqueness.

The next thing the creed says is that God is both Father and Almighty. And in some ways these two things could not be further apart.

Father – referring to God as Father suggests that God has a close and intimate relationship with each one of us – such as a good father has with their child; that God protects and encourages and wants us to grow and develop. That there is love and commitment and that our happiness or contentment pleases God and our sadnesses sadden him.

Almighty suggests God is on a different plane to us. We are mortals and he is almighty, all powerful and all knowing. God is so 'other' that it would be foolish to even think about a close relationship.

The ways God is depicted in OT and NT largely reflect this difference. In the OT the overall picture is of a God who is almighty and, we might say, remote, though there are moments where a close relationship is hinted at. In the NT it's the other way round. Jesus talks of this intimate relationship we can have, and yet God is still worshipped and revered.

In the Old Testament we are introduced to God as the Creator. Our OT reading is the climax of the story of creation, with human beings created in the image of God. This being made in God's image is, I think, something that hints at the possibility of a relationship between God and humanity, though there is no indication here of an intimate Father-child relationship.

As we read on through the OT we see that certain individuals are granted special access to God – Abraham and Moses being the most obvious early examples. Samuel and David come later. But for most people God is distant.

We can see illustrations of this if we look at the story of Moses. Moses asked God for a name to give to the people, but God didn't give one. *I am who I am* was the reply (or this could be translated as *I will be who I will be*). You cannot name me – I am beyond a name. Then when Moses was receiving the tablets of the law on the Holy

mountain, we read that if anyone else so much as touched the mountain they would die - such was the holiness, the otherness of God.

So for most of the people the concept of God being a God we could have a relationship with was alien and unthinkable. Access to God was through priests – intermediaries who oversaw the sacrificial system that underpinned the religion.

But then this is tempered with the experience of the few who did have that kind of close relationship. Many of the Psalms came from the pen of David and show the closeness of his relationship with God. So even here in the OT we have this double faceted God. Awesome and distant for most, yet for some close and intimate.

In the NT Jesus shows us a very different side of God. He teaches that God is our Father, and urges us to pray to him using the words we know so well. He talks of a God who knows us each individually and cares for our every need. In our gospel reading this morning when asked by Philip to show him the Father, Jesus says that if we look at him we have seen the Father. Philip knew Jesus; he had spent years with him listening to him, talking with him and learning from him. When Jesus answered his question he was in effect saying you can know God as intimately as you know me.

The central message of the gospel is that the OT sacrificial system which restricted access to God to the priests who were to go-between between God and his people – was now null and void. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we all have direct access to God. This was confirmed when the curtain of the temple was torn in two on that first Good Friday.

And yet God is still God. God is still holy, almighty, all powerful and all knowing. Paul refers to the glory of God; the book of Revelation paints a similar picture of God on his throne to be worshipped and adored as painted in the visions of the OT prophets like Isaiah.

When we reflect on the God as Trinity we are saying that God reveals himself in three ways – as Father, Son and Spirit. The creed looks at God from a different angle and asks us to hold in balance the closeness and the otherness of God; the Father and The Almighty.

And I guess what we can take away from this is that although we can enjoy the closeness of God as a loving parent, interested in who we are and what we do. Although we can pray to God and enjoy the presence of God in our lives, we must never forget that God is also the creator of the universe, to be worshipped, honoured and obeyed. God is both Almighty to be worshipped and Father to be enjoyed.