I wonder what your relationship to the creed that we say in our Eucharist every week is. Do you stand and let it pass you by? Do you wonder what it all means? I remember a house group I was part of in my last Church, where our leader – the vicar – clearly felt the creed was a rather dry statement. One of our number took great exception to this, because, she said, she loved reciting the creed. For her reciting the creed was hugely important because it was the time when she was able to get up each week and say, publically, with other Christians, what she believed.

I have a lot of sympathy with that view, but the fact remains that the creeds can sound a little dry, a little bit – academic. For some, on the margins of the faith they can sound offputting – you must sign up to all these ideas to be a ‘proper’ Christian. For that matter, I should imagine there are plenty of us within the church who sometimes find it hard to believe it all.

The question is – why do we do it? Why do we recite this list of beliefs every week?

We don’t know exactly when or why Christians began reciting the creed during the Eucharist, but there is a lot that we know about the history of where the creed itself came from. The creed is known properly (technically) as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. That mouthful of a title might give you some hint: it has a complicated history!

Think back to the very early days of Christianity. In those early days the Christians were a ragtag bunch of misfits and outsiders, believing in a God who had died the most dishonourable death possible, on a Cross, and then, even more improbably, come back to life. It really is impossible to imagine a more improbable system of beliefs to become a major world religion.

But that all changed in the early 300s AD, when Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the religion of the Roman empire. How that happened is a complete story in itself, which I don’t have time for now. This was all very well, but it posed Constantine with a bit of a problem. One of the best and most important ways of ensuring that his vast empire managed some amount of cohesion was to make sure everybody believed the same thing. Without social cohesion, Constantine knew the possibility for civil war was very great indeed.

The trouble was that not everybody could agree on precisely what it was that Christians believed. An early text – the Apostle’s Creed – doesn’t say much about how Jesus is related to God; it just says that he is the only son of God the Father. That’s a beautiful image, but when you’ve been raised on the precision of Greek philosophy, as the Romans had, it seemed a bit vague.

And, ultimately, it caused a major controversy. A priest by the name of Arius began preaching that Jesus was the Son of God because God had created him. Those who opposed Arius pointed out that if God had created Jesus, then Jesus was only one of God’s creatures, and that meant he wasn’t really God. You see, one of the defining things believed about God is that he created all things, and if Jesus the Son of God wasn’t also part of the creating of things, then he wasn’t a creator, and he couldn’t be God.

Constantine was horrified by the disunity in his adopted religion, and so he ordered a great council to convene and sort it out. The council met in 325 AD at Nicaea, and if you look at the text of the Creed that they produced, the first Nicene Creed of 325, you’ll see that they inserted a lot more about the relationship of God the Father to God the Son. Most of that is still in our creed today. If you look at the section on your handout about Jesus Christ, you’ll notice that it’s all about how Jesus is the same as God; ‘being of one substance with the Father’. And the original text on your sheet contains a whole load of phrases specifically *against* Arius’s ideas, - ‘But those who say: 'There was a time when he was not;' and 'He was not before he was made;' and 'He was made out of nothing,' or 'He is of another substance' or 'essence,' or 'The Son of God is created,' or 'changeable,' or 'alterable'— they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.’

It might be obvious, if you know your creed particularly well, that none of those ‘anathemas’ as they are called are in the creed we use now. So, although the bishops did some very great work at Nicaea, they didn’t manage to convince everyone, and they left out loads of important stuff about the nature of the Holy Spirit.

And so another great council was convened at Constantinople in 381. That is the council that is responsible for the final text of what we know as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed, from Nicaea-Constantinople. They reaffirmed what was said about the son of God, but the clauses attacking Arius were no longer necessary and so were removed and replaced with words about the Holy Spirit, which you’ll find on the handout. Even these words about the Holy Spirit caused controversy eventually, for the Western Church added the words ‘and the Son’ to the phrase ‘who proceeds from the Father and the Son’. To this day, the eastern Orthodox Church does not accept the version of the creed that includes the words ‘and the Son’ in relation to the Holy Spirit.

You might think from all of this that the early Christians were far too good at disagreeing and arguing about some really obscure stuff, and actually, one of the leading theologians of the Council of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus would agree with you. In a letter to a friend written in 382 he said ‘For my part, my inclination is to avoid all assemblies of Bishops, because I have never seen any council come to a good end, nor turn out to be a solution of evils. On the contrary, it usually increases them.’

But I think I would have to disagree with the sainted Gregory. The councils and the creed can certainly show us how good we are at getting things wrong. But the major point is actually opposite to that. The point about the creed is that it bears witness to an incredibly intense and passionate debate about the nature of God and the nature of his revelation to us in Jesus. It is a good thing to come together and talk about what we mean by God and what God means to us; to do so is worship in itself. Even if we disagree with one another we are still talking about God.

And that, if you will, is why the creed is still important to us now; it gives us a starting point for the discussion, and if we know a little of its history, it shows us how important it is to talk about faith, to have the discussion in the first place. This text is not simply some venerable thing set in stone to be yawned through on a Sunday morning.

The people who wrote this creed would never have expected that it was the absolute last word about God or Jesus; it was the best thing they could say at the time. And it was designed to guide future Christians into the best possible starting point for their own faith. And so the way to approach this creed – any creed that we use regularly in worship – is not to feel depressed if you don’t quite agree with it all, or even understand it all. The best thing to do is to give space to your questions and your curiosity when you read it. If you do that, then you enter into dialogue with those people who put the creed together.

The creed is part of how we talk about God. Christians throughout the ages have discussed it, agreed with it, disagreed with it; they have found it useful to spark off ideas about God. And so the creed makes us part of a very important thing; the great tradition of figuring out how to talk about God. But being part of the tradition doesn’t mean meekly sitting back and taking what we are told – it means engaging with what has gone before, because what has gone before is where and how Christians have found God.

But what about this business of belief? After all, that is what the creed should be all about. I had the great privilege of hearing Brother Sam of Hilfield Friary speak this week, and he said that he always assumed that we do not believe the creed individually, but that it takes the whole church to believe the creed *together*. Now, by that I don’t think he means that we should agree to divvy up the clauses and make it our business to believe one each, but rather, that in our journey of faith we should assist each other in the business of believing. Belief is all about trust, and the moment in our Christian life, either baptism or confirmation, when we choose to say *I believe* is when we admit that we *do* trust, or that we *want* to trust. Saying *I Trust that these things are true* doesn’t then mean we have all the answers; it means that we’re engaging on the journey of finding out about God.

There are moments when we stumble and find it hard to trust, and that is when we draw on the belief of the whole Church, both the Church around us now and the Church that is all Christians throughout history that the creed bears witness to.

And so the ongoing life of the Church is all about *together* ***we*** *believe*, for it is in believing together that we learn to talk about the God who is found in the creed, in the Eucharist and scripture, and in our lives. The creed is not a dead document with nothing to be added; it is a living document to which we add our stories as we experience the action of God in our lives. And so, probably, there will be moments when you find it a little dry; when it fails to come alive for you. But, like the lady in my previous Church, there will also be moments when you want to stand up and shout it from the rooftops, because it says something about the love of God you’ve experienced.

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