

“Creeds”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

Wesley Uniting Church, 19 June 2011

Genesis 1:1-5, 1:26-2:3; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Four creeds or statements of faith are attached at the end of this sermon

There's an old legend about the early Christians in Jerusalem, that one day as they were sitting together at dinner, Peter said "I believe in God the Father almighty". "Oh", said Andrew, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord". John, not to be outdone added "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit" and James "born of the virgin Mary" etc. And thus as they went round the room, the Apostles' Creed came to be.

A nice story! Unfortunately that legend dates only from the 5th century. But fortunately, we do know the origins of the Apostles' Creed. It emerged in the church in Rome around 200AD, as a baptismal confession of faith. Hippolytus, a famous Roman theologian of the time, records for us that in baptism the new convert was immersed in water three times. The first time the question asked was "do you believe in God the Father almighty?" The convert answered "I believe", and they were then dunked in the water. The second time the question was "do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, was dead and buried, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?" And the third question was "do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?" Not much different to what we do today, 1800 years later.

And so was born the Apostles Creed, there in Rome, about 170 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus – the first full creed of the Christian church. Please turn in Uniting in Worship to page 122, to see the texts of the two great creeds of the church, the Apostles' and the Nicene creeds.

These great creeds of the church both emphasise the Trinitarian nature of God. They say relatively little about God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, but because of the long-argued controversies about Jesus they spell out lots about the God the Son. The Nicene Creed, composed a hundred years later than the Apostles' Creed in the midst of a huge controversy over whether or not Jesus was God, goes into great detail to spell out how Jesus is indeed the Son of God, "eternally begotten", "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God" and so on. So the Christian belief was codified, and a test of orthodoxy was established.

Our Bible readings today each reflect our Christian belief in the Holy Trinity. At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians Paul blesses his readers with what we popularly call "the grace" today, a Trinitarian blessing. At the end of Matthew's gospel the risen Jesus gives his disciples instructions about spreading the faith to every nation, and directs them to baptise in the Trinitarian name – a direction that Christian clergy follow very closely across the world still today. The Genesis reading about creation is less obviously Trinitarian. Clearly God the Father, the Creator, is present in every part – but where's the Spirit and the Son? Well, the understanding is that when Genesis refers to a "wind from God" sweeping over the waters, that creative wind is the Holy Spirit, as in the Hebrew the word for wind and for spirit is one and the same word, "ruach". And the Son is present there as God's Word - God spoke and it was done – the Word of God being an alternate designation for God the Son as in the well-known prologue to John's gospel "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God", and Jesus is then described by John as "the Word made flesh".

What do we make of these creeds today? Well, the great bulk of the Christian worldwide family still accepts the creeds as authoritative statements of the faith. The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church, crafted in the late 1960s, says this:

The Uniting Church enters into unity with the Church throughout the ages by its use of the confessions known as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Uniting Church receives these as authoritative statements of the Catholic Faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith.

The only possible let-out in that statement regarding the authority of the creeds is the acknowledgment they are “framed in the language of their day” with the implication that we might frame statements about our faith a bit differently today.

And indeed we do. Turn to page 130 in *Uniting in Worship*. The affirmation “We are a Pilgrim People” is drawn from our Basis of Union. Note how it too is very definitely Trinitarian, but it does then take us beyond mere statements of what we believe towards statements about how we are to live as Christians. It’s more than a sterile collection of dogmatic teachings, compared to the creeds. In the last paragraph it states that “every member of the church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified” and then goes on to say “we will serve the world for which Christ died”.

A more recent affirmation is the one that follows, from the United Church of Canada “God is with us”. This too is Trinitarian. But then it goes on with poetic brevity to say how “we are called to be the church” by our celebrating of God’s presence, our living and serving others, our seeking of justice and resistance to evil. And in the 1998, at a national meeting where I had the privilege of being present, the Canadians added another line in that paragraph, “to live with respect in Creation”. Here we see that creeds today have a more practical application – not just dogma, but doing; not just doctrine, but discipleship.

The Apostles’ and Nicene creeds express for us vital theological convictions about God, focussing strongly on God’s threefold nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They will always be important as stating the received doctrines of the Christian church, our belief. But they’re only part of the story. In and of themselves they don’t bring our belief, our faith, to life. In and of themselves they don’t really inspire us to follow the way of Jesus, the way of compassion and service and prayerfulness and justice. What does inspire us is our living relationship with God in the here and now, alongside the life and example of Jesus. The creeds are important – but perhaps even more important is the strength of our relationship with the living God right now, and our response of committed discipleship, how we live the faith and not just believe it.

Dogma is to be supplemented by doing, doctrines are to be lived in discipleship.

To the glory of God, Amen.

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s 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 Nicene Creed

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

We believe in the 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 of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
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,
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.

We are a pilgrim people

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
We proclaim Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One,
confessing him as Lord
to the glory of God the Father.
In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
we acclaim Jesus as the Lord of the Church,
the Head over all things,
the beginning of a new creation.

We acknowledge that we live and work
between the time of Christ's death and resurrection
and the final consummation of all things
which he will bring.

We are a pilgrim people,
always on the way towards a promised goal;
on the way Christ feeds us with word and sacraments,
and we have the gift of the Spirit

in order that we may not lose the way.

We will live and work within the faith and unity
of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church,
bearing witness to that unity
which is both Christ's gift and his will.

We affirm that every member of the Church
is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified.
Together with all the people of God,
we will serve the world for which Christ died.
And we await with hope the day of the Lord Jesus.

Adapted from the *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church in Australia

God is with us

We are not alone,
we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

The United Church of Canada, General Council 1968, alt. 1998