

*This sermon is based on the Diocese of Europe's Lent Course 2025,
'Celebrating Nicaea: seeing afresh the faith which holds us together',
written by Revd Dr Donald McFadyen, and the associated course resources.*

The Nicene Creed – 1

There is a rather lovely story about an elderly priest who was conducting Evensong. The music was sublime and as he was sitting listening to the choir sing the Nunc Dimittis he drifted off to sleep. At the end, when the creed would normally be said next, he remained snoozing in his place. A young curate then gently tapped him on the arm with a cue, 'I believe in God...' Suddenly alert again the priest responded, 'So do I lad, so do I'.

The wonderful thing about the creed is that it unites us – unites Christians all over the world – and celebrates all that God is.

2025 (so we're a year late – sorry) was the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in the year 325, which led to the writing of the Nicene Creed, which is still used Sunday by Sunday by millions of Christians, including Anglicans to proclaim their faith (it's the creed we've *just said/are about to say*).

Today is the first in a series of 5 sermons we'll be having over the coming weeks looking at the Nicene Creed.

So what is a creed, and why do they matter?

The word 'creed' comes from the Latin word *credo* which means 'I believe and trust'. So a creed is a statement of what we as a Christian church believe and trust'.

So, to use a few images:

If you think of your faith as being like a footpath leading away from you across a large field, the creeds can be thought of as like the edges of the path, which because they are clearly marked enable you to see the path more clearly into the distance. Or, you might prefer to think of them as being like the handrails on the deck of a boat that you can hold onto in rough weather to keep yourself upright.

So they help us see more deeply into our faith and help us to stand firm when our faith is challenged.

The idea 'trust' is important too. We might say, for example, 'I believe in the Loch Ness monster', but that's probably not going to change how we live from day to day. Whereas to say 'I believe in God' it makes a big difference.

How did the Nicene Creed come about?

Well, believe it or not, it was a Roman Emperor, Constantine, who was concerned about his empire fragmenting, who wanted to ensure that everyone in the churches in his empire was united. At the time there was a lot of argument over how the church should see Jesus. Is he really God, and how can he be both divine and human?

So, Constantine called the first ecumenical council in the history of the church – he called over 300 bishops, plus their staff (so well over a thousand people) from all over the Roman Empire to a meeting at his palace at Nicaea – today that's the modern town of Iznik in Turkey.

Now remember that these are people who have seen the church severely persecuted almost to the point of extinction under previous Roman Emperors, the faith that they were discussing was literally a matter of life and death.

The views of 2 main theologians, Arius and Athanasius, were debated for over 2 months apparently. They'd both been reading the Bible but had come to different conclusions about what it was saying about Jesus in relation to God the Father.

Anyway, the council did agree in the end. They emphasised the 'one-ness' of God. We believe in *one* God. Jesus is truly God and, to use a rather strange phrase, he is 'of the same essence' as God – homoousion they called it.

And they produced this unifying symbol, this summary if you like, of our beliefs. They spoke with one voice of the centrality of Jesus Christ, at a time when the church might so easily have vanished. The creed they produced focussed on the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

And actually it was another 60 years or so later at the Council of Constantinople that the Nicene Creed as we know it today was produced, which also includes more about the Holy Spirit, the Church and baptism.

This is the most widely used creed today.

But aren't there other creeds?

Yes.

There's the Apostles creed – which is used at Mattins and Evensong and in some of our other services – sometimes in a contemporary question and answer form. It's a slightly shorter creed – first used in about the year 390 – especially at services of baptism where the candidates learned a short summary of what Christians believe – and hence the words, 'I believe...' at the beginning rather than 'We believe...'

There's also the Athanasian Creed. This is much longer – a full 3 pages in the Book of Common Prayer – talking in detail about the Trinity. It was written in the 5th century as guidance for teachers rather than for use in services. Today Common Worship does include an authorised affirmation of faith which is an extract from the Athanasian Creed – some of our Communion services here use this in certain seasons.

Over the coming weeks we're going to be exploring the different parts of the Nicene Creed more deeply. The words aren't always straightforward and I think it'll be useful for all of us not just to say it routinely but to be taken aback by some of the startling language in it and learn new things.

We pray that this journey through the Creed will strengthen our faith and deepen our understanding, and inspire us to live out its truths with renewed conviction and joy. As we say 'we believe', we join our voices with the Church throughout history and across the world, affirming together the good news of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Wendy Middleton, June 2026