

Sermon for Trinity Sunday
 St David's, Anglican Church, Burnside
 (With help from other sources)
 26 May 2024

Ever since Moses asked "What is your name?" And the God Moses asked that question of said "*I Am who I Am.*" "*This is what you shall say to the Israelites, I Am has sent me to you.*" (Ex 3.13-14) Generations of believers have asked similar questions, seeking to know who and what God is. Knowing the name of someone is important. It makes a relationship, even a casual one, more personal, to the extent that knowing a name is potentially everything!

It's either the very brave or the foolhardy person who attempts to explain the Holy Trinity with a sermon. So, perhaps brave but not foolhardy this morning I'm asking you to travel with me, along the pathway to the origins of the church's creeds. I'm asking us to be more aware of the history and conflict they aroused, as well as the importance of our creeds as they seek to provide an answer to the question 'who is God?'

This morning we will recite the Nicaene Creed. If we were attending Morning or Evening Prayer we would recite the Apostles Creed. Where did these creeds spring from and why? Who do we say Jesus is? Who is the Holy Spirit? What is our Christology? If you want to read what the church understands about the Holy Trinity - Father, Son, Holy Spirit, you can do no better than to read the Creed of Saint Athanasius. You'll find it in our prayer book. But I suspect it will leave you no wiser.

It's perhaps difficult to appreciate that Northern Africa was a significant part of the Christian world during these early centuries of Christian influence. We all know of Augustine of Hippo, (now Souk Ahras, Algeria) of 'make me a Christian Lord but not yet' fame. It is apparent he was having a good time as a youth. [And Tertullian, Perpetua, Felicity, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian, Athanasius], were over time influencers of the Christian Church in Africa. During the third and fourth century the Christian Church was in turmoil understanding the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Was Jesus truly divine whilst on earth in human form? Was his humanity just a guise to cover his divinity? Could Jesus be considered one with God? In substance? In the person of God? Did Jesus truly suffer on the cross? These and other questions needed answers. As Moses asked a long time before, "What shall I tell them?" (Ex 3.13b)

Similarly In today's Christian Church our view of God causes dissent and separation. The Evangelical and Catholic wings of the Anglican Church is an example. Divisions within today's Christian Church are as obvious if less cause for martyrdom.

Some of the major participants and combatants in the formation of the Church's creeds I'll name.

Athanasius first and foremost. Athanasius, scholar, bishop, pope of Alexandria, Egypt. Athanasius was born in Alexandria in 296 -298. At this time Egypt was a part of the Roman Empire. He died aged 75 or 77 in Alexandria on 2 May 373. The creed with his name is contested concerning his authorship. But he was a staunch defender that Jesus is of the same substance of God although a person in His own right. [Athanasius was originally buried in Alexandria, but his remains were later transferred to the Chiesa di San Zaccaria in Venice, Italy. During Pope Shenouda III's visit to Rome (4–10 May 1973), Pope Paul VI gave the Coptic Patriarch a relic of Athanasius,^[72] which he brought back to Egypt on 15 May. The relic is currently preserved under the new Saint Mark's Coptic

Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo. However, the majority of Athanasius's corpse remains in the Venetian church.]

Arianism so named after the priest Arius (250 or 256 – 336) His belief was that the Son came into being through the will of the Father; the Son, therefore, had a beginning. Although the Son was before all eternity, he was not eternal, and Father and Son were not of the same substance..

Nestorianism, you guessed correctly, was named after Nestorius (AD 450) who held that Christ had two loosely united natures, divine and human. Nestorius's teachings became the root of controversy when he publicly challenged the long-used title Theotokos ('God-Bearer') for Mary. He suggested that the title denied Christ's full humanity, arguing instead that Jesus had two persons

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity [Latin: Trinitas, lit. 'triad', from Latin: trinus 'threefold is the central doctrine concerning the nature of God in most Christian churches], which defines one God existing in three coequal, coeternal, consubstantial divine persons: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ) and God the Holy Spirit, three distinct persons (hypostases) sharing one essence/substance/nature (homoousion). These disagreements divided the church into various factions for over 55 years, from the time of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 until the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

The Council of Nicaea (325) was the first ecumenical council of the church. Nicaea was the first time that any attempt had been made to summon a general council of the whole church at which, at least in theory, the church in every part of the Roman Empire should be represented.

Our creeds are divided into three parts. These are concerned with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Notice the three parts as you say the creed this morning and be aware of the statement that they are of the same substance although simplified words are used. See if you can identify the co-eternal, co-eternal, and of the same substance statements about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Although we are not using the Athanasius Creed this morning despite the instruction to do so in the Book of Common Prayer, I hope that when we use the Nicaene or the Apostles Creed we have an understanding of the Creeds' importance and a better knowledge of what we are saying, and who the church believes God to be as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Fr John

Saturday 25 May 2024