

I Believe
Acts 2:14, 22-32
LUMC 03 15 2020

Theme: The need for creed

Ahhhh, politics – the most promising of all careers.... I like political jokes, unless they get elected. Well, politics has been around for a long time and historians and theologians alike still argue whether Emperor Constantine, who professed his faith in the year 312 was sincere or simply trying to gain support from the masses. Whatever the truth is with Constantine, his freeing actions and endorsement did enable Christianity to flourish without persecution and by this time had expanded into much of the known world. This all occurred prior to the time of the first “Pope,” the “catholic” church really was simply the “universal” church. It was in 325 that Constantine called an ecumenical council together, roughly 250-300 bishops, scholars, and leaders together to debate the nature and substance of the Trinity of God.

Prior to this time, in the second century, persecution had kept the church small and more intimate. People knew each other and it was easier to keep faith on track through peer pressure and love rather than formal rules. By late third century, tolerance of Christians grew and the church began expanding and became more liturgical.

It was around 320 when Arius, a priest from Alexandria wrote a little piece called *Thalia* or ‘Banquet’. Arius was a poet and wrote jingles. He poked fun at those who believed Jesus was actually divine and the same nature as God so the controversy raged on as Arius began to draw interest and adherents to his theology. Arius had already been removed once as a bishop and even ex-communicated. He convinced Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia to join his side. Writings were widely copied and distributed, so his version of theology had spread.

Arius was outside of accepted teaching, the instruction of the Apostles and two centuries of universal testimony. The Apostles had left specific instruction (See Paul’s letters) about not adding to, or changing, the heart of the teaching of Jesus. As Arius’ teaching spread, it caught Constantine’s attention and after a few years work unifying the Empire, he called for the council.

There was a serious matter to discuss and Arius had raised the topic to the attention of everyone. For the Greek, there was God and then there was “everything” else – everything. So, the questions became, if Jesus was “begotten” of God, in other words, created, then Jesus could not be the same as God. The question, then, “Is Christ of the substance of God, or is he made of matter like humans and the angels?” Like Pilot, we ask, “What is truth?”

There are references to God's substance in the Nicene Creed; **“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”** and second, **“...he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.”**

This was not a new concept of the unity of God and Jesus' substance. There are numerous writings prior to the council of Nicea that discuss this very matter. For the vast majority of the church for two centuries, there was no dissent; God and Jesus were of one substance – God. We need to understand the original meaning of the Greek notion of “begotten.” The sense is not that Jesus came “out of” or “from” God, but rather that God's substance was “divided.” Another word that is used, is “consubstantiated” or “in every way the same as God.” It is as if God has cut himself in two, one substance divided for a purpose. At least as early as 128 Trypho, a Jew, wrote of this. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and many other writers through the first two centuries agreed. Other early creeds like the Didache affirm the unity of God and Jesus.

There is a modern theory by some popular figures that the notion of the Trinity was “invented” at the Council in 325. This is simply not true by any historical record or through the teaching of the church.

Arius and bishop Alexander of Constantinople were already bitter rivals for it was Alexander who had stripped Arius of his office. At the council, he stood and began singing his jingles. One Athanasius, an elder or leader in the church with bishop Alexander approached Arius and slapped him. Athanasius was promptly arrested and stripped of his office. He was later reinstated and recognized as a pillar of the early church.

Arius was exiled but not silenced. His followers and theology became entrenched as a separate but minority understanding. This is how the heresy of “Arianism” came to be. Arianism; the belief that Jesus is not divine, but rather created and called for a specific role by God.

In Acts chapter 2 we see Peter finally beginning to get his feet under him. He has followed Jesus, declared Jesus Son of God the Messiah, and yet still doubted who Jesus is. An amazing event has happened, the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, something so radical that the entire community of Jerusalem became aware of it and, like us wondering what is coming next in the pandemic, they want to know. Something has stirred inside Peter, we'd call it the Holy Spirit, and he steps into the leadership role Jesus had prepared him for and he is transformed even as he faces the city.

November 3, 1979, Valerie and I left Flagstaff Community Hospital as parents. Life would never been the same as it had been before November 2. Oh, we knew about parenting, we knew where our parents had succeeded and where they had failed, now it was our turn. Cue our parent's maniacal laughter as they said, "Now they'll find out."

As Peter spoke, he told the crowd what he knew; Jesus' call, actions with God working through him, that David had prophesied about him it is a statement of what Peter believed about Jesus a 'credo' to Jesus' witness. The word 'creed' means believe so when we recite a creed we are stating, "This is what I believe." Peter's statement, although not complete, is a first attempt at a Christian creed.

The earliest creed for us may be in the 'Shema,' The Hearing Prayer, I spoke about the past two weeks which establishes God as our God and the only God whom we are called to love above everything else. The first part of the Nicene Creed recalls the 'Shema'.

**We believe in one God,
The Father, the Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Of all that is, seen and unseen.**

This is the God Peter refers to when he begins describing Jesus and his ministry, the Jesus God worked 'through' who died on the cross but who did not remain dead and buried. **"It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."**

This same God will raise you from the dead if you but believe in the name of Jesus, the name above every name. Of course, we realize that this God whom we seek to know, love, and serve can never be contained by any creed, God will always remain beyond our human grasp yet, they have a powerful function. One scientist, Lyndon Eaves said they serve as our operational hypothesis. They also protect us from radical individualism or inventing our own faith like this, "I love saying the OLD words. I just interpret them differently for our time."

William Sloan Coffin in his book, *Creedo*, writes that a creed is that "to which I give my heart." What do you give your heart to?

With that we'll stop today and take up the rest of the Creed next week as we look at the nature of Jesus' and the Holy Spirit.