

## **Sermon, 28 January 2007—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71; First Corinthians 14:12-20; Luke 4:21-32

Last Sunday, we began a brief exploration of portions of the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of our Sunday Eucharist. I spoke, not about Scripture itself, but about our practice of listening to lengthy portions of Scripture and about how that shapes us. In Anglicanism, the shared goals of the liturgy are the praise of God and the edification of God's people. The Reformers thought no better edification could occur than the extensive daily public reading of Scripture. Beyond receiving obvious moral injunctions in the lessons, by adopting the posture of attentive listening, we learn openness and discernment: openness also to life outside these walls and discernment of God acts in the history of God's people in the past and in our own day.

The Creed and the Prayers are the two first steps of our corporate response. They are our public testimony among like-minded believers that we are willing to rely on what we have heard. Saying the Creed, we locate ourselves, we find ourselves on the map so we can look up, survey the surrounding terrain, and move forward. So what is the Creed? Why say it?

In the words of the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, a creed is a “concise, formal, and authorized statement of important points of Christian doctrine.” It is concise because it sticks only to what is essential. It is formal because it is public and official, not subjective or spontaneous. It is authorized because it has been reviewed and endorsed by those in positions of oversight and guidance. The Latin Church called it a “symbol,” as if to underscore that it is not in itself your faith, but its representation; you depict what you believe, what you are aligned with, what you are committed

to, by the use of these words. And the Christian Creed is always given the shape of the Trinity, with a paragraph about each person in the Godhead.

The controversial aspects of the Creed—to tell the truth, the reason for its existence—all cluster in the second paragraph on the person of Christ. Jews and Muslims have no quarrel with the first paragraph: the oneness of God, the Creator of all. The description of the activity of the Holy Spirit is familiar to them: speaking through the prophets, gathering a community, forgiving sins. But the claims made about Jesus are unique to Christianity. We are Christians because we say things about the Christ that only we say. And the Creed is where those essential and distinctive claims are enshrined.

Most of the Creed's current bad press is because of its origin. It is the product of two church councils that took place in the fourth century, one in the year 325, in Nicaea, a town close to Constantinople, the new imperial capital, and one in the year 381, in Constantinople itself. And the origin of the Creed is connected with the emperor Constantine.

Constantine was a forceful general and a willful administrator. Coming into power during a period of civil war, he defeated his final rival at the Milvian Bridge in the year 312. The story of his victory became a Christian legend: in a dream, Constantine saw a cross superimposed on the sun and heard the words, “in this sign, conquer;” so when he woke, he had a standard made with that symbol and under it defeated Maxentius. In the next year, he established freedom of worship throughout the empire with the Edict of Milan. During his reign, he made the imperial protection of Christians one of his priorities; his mother, Helena, was a Christian after all.

In the year 325, he called together the first ecumenical council, in order to end the squabbling between Christians of various theological opinions and to consolidate their religious position. Much has been made of

Constantine's desire to homogenize and subdue the empire and to use the Church to accomplish that. Much should also be made of the awe felt by bishops and ecclesiastics who had narrowly survived systematic persecution under Diocletian, who was bent on extirpating Christianity, and who now found themselves in the presence of an emperor who affirmed and recruited them and who was interested in the articulation of their faith.

The debate in the year 325 had to do with the divinity of Jesus. Some Christians, hoping to protect the immutability and transcendence of God, claimed that Christ could not be divine, but was the firstborn of all creatures, properly exalted, the one through whom God made the angelic hierarchies and "this fragile earth, our island home." Others claimed that the whole promise of Scripture was that God, not an emissary, had become incarnate, and that what we encountered in Christ was not another creature, however exalted, but God, therefore true peace resided in the cosmos, alienation was overcome, and the gap between humanity and divinity was finally closed.

Constantine and the majority of the bishops agreed with this second position. They were right: religion must be about human access to ultimate transcendence, and for Christians, by definition, the portal to divinity must be found in Christ. The resonant and rhythmic phrases of the Creed hammer home that Jesus Christ is "true God from true God, ... begotten, not made, of one being with the Father." If what we know in Christ *is not* God, then we are still adrift and abandoned; if what we know in Christ *is* God, then every breach can be healed, and reconciliation is the goal of Creation. The Creed was then issued in the acts of the council and used as a standard of belief, to assess the orthodoxy of bishops and to inform the instruction for baptism.

In its original form, the Creed simply concluded that Christians also believe in the Holy Spirit. This was soon felt to be inadequate, since the divinity of the Holy Spirit was not clearly enough affirmed. So the phrases that conclude the Creed in its present form—that the Spirit is glorified with the Father and the Son, that there is one Church, that there is a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and a life in the world to come—were added at the church council that was held in the year 381 in Constantinople.

Within 100 years, the Creed had been incorporated into the Eucharist, to be sung by those present as a confirmation of their faith. It is significant that the original Creed is in first person plural. That is done, not to indicate that these are the collated agreements of various individuals, but to present the corporate affirmation of the Church, our shared faith, the belief around which we meet. When I recite the Creed, I am not indicating that I add my opinions and interpretations to theirs, but that I assent to this proclamation and make it mine. We recite it together to express our continuity with the Church over the centuries and to recognize ourselves as the heirs of the apostles and martyrs, confessors and saints, who held these words, who struggled to understand them, but who treasured them as baseline truth.

When we recite the Creed, we confess our faith. Those who are called confessors of the faith are remembered as those who engaged in heroic testimony, upholding the church's proclamation, by which all that is worldly is judged, even in the face of opposition and persecution. Confession is a public act; when we confess, we speak to at least one other person, even if it is only God. Confession is a subjective statement that acknowledges an objective measurement; when we confess, we acknowledge a standard, usually a sense of truth or goodness, by which our solemn public words are measured as we make them. The objective and public nature of confession

also makes it solemn; we stand to be weighed about something significant, something that by its very nature is represents our understanding of reality, and we hope to find whether or not we are aligned with it.

This is, I think, where we get confused. Who can assess, we think, what *I* believe? By what standard is *my* faith measured? But faith is one of those slippery words—like so many religious words. Faith has both a subjective and an objective dimension. Subjective faith refers to our internal stance, our personal story, our readiness to lie supple in God’s hands, our willingness to rise from our beds at God’s disposal each day. No one but God can know whether or not we live in deep open trust, not even we ourselves—certainly not another human being. Objective faith refers to external Tradition, ecclesiastical history, a proclamation affirmed and maintained, a community joined, a story participated in, an inheritance received and passed on. Our determination to stand with the Church and proclaim what it holds to be true *can* be known and even demonstrated. Both kinds of faith are necessary. In its subjective mode, faith is my readiness to approach the world trusting in God; in its objective mode, faith is my assent to a way of understanding the world that I share with countless others, a multitude no one can number, the communion of saints.

When we recite the Creed, in other words, we are naming our family. We are stating to whom we belong. We are acknowledging an identity. It prepares us, in its own way, for the second corporate statement that we recite in one voice. This one is also about who we are, also spoken in first person plural: as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say what he said, and to call God “our Father”—“ours” because you and I meet in Christ, but “ours” also because we say it with Jesus, and he and you and I pray it as one. To recite the Creed together does not eliminate my own brooding and

speculating about its words, my own recognition of where I resist them and where I add to them, my own need to rely on the faith of others when I hesitate and vacillate and feel only reservations, any more than my saying the Lord's Prayer in community eliminates my own private doubt about my readiness to live all those words as mine, my murmuring of personal petitions under its strong current, my own stumbling over forgiveness. When we discover where we resist, we have discovered where we must lean in. If your muscles are tight, stretching, not clenching, is the solution.

It is proper that what we say about God be more than we can understand, more than we are comfortable with, more that we would say on our own. If the Creed stretches us, it is because the faith of the Church is larger than we are. It is proper that something objectively beyond us, something slightly mysterious and baffling, stand in for our claims about God. If the Creed jostles and jars us, it is because it struggles to name what cannot be named and reaches beyond our grasp towards minimum truth as received in Revelation. It is proper that what we affirm about God be an ancient inheritance. If the Creed seems indifferent to our vacillating opinions, it is because it steadies us so that we can align ourselves with a great cloud of witnesses, not only those of antiquity, whose worldview we have left behind, but also those of the future, whose worldview we can never anticipate; but we know that, together with them, we receive and hold and pass on these words, and together with them join in the confession of our faith in the one God, and in our praise of God as the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit for all eternity.