

Why do the creeds matter?

Why do the creeds matter? The great saints who understand us best teach that the human person seeks nothing less than union with God. The desire for union with God, the desire to have what God alone can give, is the root of all our hoping and desiring, even when that desire goes astray. The creeds invite us both to know the God who loves us, and to love God who knows us and loves us first. The creeds are a Spirit-inspired and guided human response to God's revelation of himself. God makes himself known so that we can know and love him, and so that we can know and love one another. The Creeds distil and sum up what the Bible and the Church teach about God and about all created things in relation to God.

We can appreciate the importance of the creeds by seeing how they correspond to the virtue of faith which has already been considered as part of this course. The creeds fulfil the aspiration of the intellect to know and understand what is true (faith is an act of the intellect). The creeds also provide a destination or object for the human will, they teach us what we ought to love (faith is an act of the will). We don't just believe 'in' God, we believe 'into' God, the creeds invite us to live toward God, and in conformity with what God teaches and promises. Finally, the creeds are a gift of grace, they invite us to contemplate and to love what God has revealed and what we could not know without God making himself known (faith is an act of grace). In this sense, the creeds do not offer merely human knowledge. Rather, the creeds are the grace-inspired human response to God's revelation of himself in history, in the Bible, in the lives and thinking of the saints, and most especially in the life and work of the Son of God who reveals God in space and time. In assenting to what God has revealed, and in willing, in choosing with God's help, to know what God has shown to us, we do not just learn truths, but in some measure we participate and share in the Truth which is God himself: 'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."' (John 14.6).

If we are to love God and to seek the good things which God wants for us, we need to know who God is. 'Whosoever would be saved needs before all things to hold fast the Catholic faith', proclaims the Athanasian Creed,

in words which seem harsh to many modern people. We accept that loving God and one another is an intrinsic part of being healed, made whole, and saved. However, we cannot love God if we do not in some measure know God. Love without knowledge falls short, love without knowledge is a kind of self-love, an affirmation of our own desires or imaginations which leave us closed off from both God and one another. In the same way, the creeds correct the heresy and confusion that God is what we want God to be. Imagine a husband who seeks to love his wife not as she is, but as he wants her to be. This is a selfish love that does not really see or know the person who is loved.

Knowing God is part of the faith which saves us, the faith which enables us to say 'yes' to God's revelation and God's purposes. The Nicene Creed affirms that the Son of God is of one and the same 'substance' or 'being' with God the Father (*homo-ousion*). He is not, in his essential being or nature, merely very much like God (*homoi-ousion*). The intensity of the debates which resulted in the Creed of Nicea in 325 may seem puzzling. However, the bishops who gathered in Nicea understood that if Jesus is only like God, he cannot do what God can do, he cannot forgive us, save us, and give us eternal life. Likewise, if Jesus is not fully man, if he does not have a complete and entire human nature with a human will and mind as well as a divine mind and will, then he cannot heal and restore the whole of human nature. It is a great comfort to those who suffer mental or physical anguish to know that there is no part of human life which is cut off from God, to know that the whole of who we are has been taken into the life of God. The creeds articulate the faith and the truth which saves us, and the knowledge which the creeds offer enables us to trust God. The creeds invite us to know the God who loves us and who invites us to love God and to love one another in response.

The creeds do not only tell us about God and what God does, the creeds offer a rational and coherent picture of the universe and everything that exists. According to the Nicene Creed, God the Father Almighty is the 'Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible', and the Son, his Word and Wisdom, is the One 'By whom all things were made'. Creation is not the production of a mechanism that is then left to

run its course. Creation is more like a song which God sustains at every moment by ‘the word of his power’ (Hebrews 1.3). What the medical researcher learns about viruses or how to prevent the spread of disease, what the historian or archaeologist discovers, what the physicist comes to know about the smallest particles, none of this is a surprise to God by whom and through whom all things are made. The creeds tell us why there is something rather than nothing. The creeds invite us to see the whole world illumined and radiant with divine light. The creeds teach us to expect that the patterns, order, and intelligibility which scientists discover reflect the order and purposefulness given to all things by the divine Word and wisdom. There is no outside of God’s world. All of this helps us to appreciate why the knowledge which the creeds distil is not a matter for a particular faith or religious community, but rather a gift for all people, in all places, and in all ages: it is the catholic faith.

Finally, the creeds distil and sum up what the Bible and the Church teach about God. St Thomas Aquinas helpfully describes why we need the creeds: ‘The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.’ (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, second part of the second part, reply to objection 1). In his sermon ‘The Rule of Faith as Maintained by the Fathers and the Church of England’, E. B. Pusey, one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement, echoes Aquinas: ‘We acknowledge that Holy Scripture is the source of all saving truth; but it does not therefore follow that everyone, unguided, is to draw for himself the truth out of that living well’. Pusey describes the creeds as summaries of the teaching of Scripture, ‘yet not identical with it; capable of being proved by it, but received before it and independent of it’. Pusey appeals to St Cyril of Jerusalem, whose ‘Catechetical Lectures’ teach the faith of Nicea in the generation immediately after the Council: ‘Do not then believe me because I tell you these things, unless thou receive from

the Holy Scriptures the proof of what is set forth; for this salvation, which is of our faith, is not by ingenious reasonings, but by proof from the Holy Scriptures'. This, argues Pusey, is the consistent teaching of the Fathers of the Church and of the Church of England ('Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation' Article VI).

Pusey argued that we learn not only what the Scriptures teach from the Fathers, but also how to read the Scriptures. In Acts Chapter 13, St Paul visits the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia. He finds in the second Psalm, 'Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee', a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ (Ps 2.7, Acts 13.33). In the lead up to the Nicene Council, this was one of many texts which was a cause of debate. Against the followers of Arius who argued that the Son of God came into being at a particular time or 'day', that he was creature, the Nicene interpretation of the psalm proclaimed that the Son of God was begotten 'before all words' or 'before all ages', i.e. on the one 'day' of eternity. This way of finding Christ in the whole Bible, both revealed and hidden, was part of the teaching of the Bible which is distilled in the Nicene Creed.

In his sermon on the 'Rule of Faith', E. B. Pusey also argues that what the creeds teach is 'inworked into our spirit by devotion, day by day, made part of our very being by being spoken to Almighty God'. Pusey here emphasizes the way in which worship and adoration are keys to unlock the kind of knowledge which the creeds offer. We do not stand over against God, as if God were merely an 'object' of our knowledge, but rather we know and believe God from within God's knowledge of himself, of us, and of all created things. The importance of the place of the creeds in the liturgy and worship of the Church will be the subject of the fourth and final portion of this Advent consideration of the creeds.

#### Topics for Discussion

Is it possible to love God without knowing God? How does knowledge shape or inform our love for God?

How does what we know about God enable us to trust God?

What is the relationship between the Creeds and the Bible? How do the creeds help us to read the Bible?

Does what the creeds teach about God and the world promote scientific study? What are the problems with the view that there is a conflict between true science and catholic faith?

Resources:

Robert Barron, *Light from Light: A Theological Reflection on the Nicene Creed*. 'Word on Fire Ministries' promotes the work of Bishop Barron with free podcasts and other resources available for a fee. Bp Barron is an evangelist, public intellectual, and the diocesan bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Winona, Rochester, USA.

Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Dr Williams considers how the Apostles Creed proclaims and reveals a God in whom we may trust.

Dorothy L. Sayers 'Creed or Chaos?' This is an address delivered at the Biennial Festival of the Church Tutorial Classes Association in Derby, May 4th, 1940. Against the backdrop of the Second World War Sayers considers the importance of true belief, and how what we believe affects how we live. Available for free at the link here

<https://alor.org/Storage/Library/PDF/Sayers%20DL%20-%20Essays%20Part%20III.pdf>

Jose Carlos Gonzalez-Hurtado, *New Scientific Evidence for the Existence of God*.

For a podcast interview about the book follow the link here

<https://www.firstthings.com/media/science-says-god-is-real>