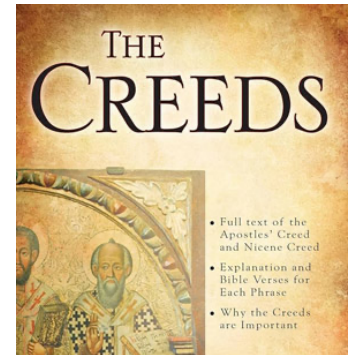


Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer

Creeds

Last week we discussed Holy Week and Easter. We were again reminded how Holy Week and Easter are central to our faith as Christians. But what is our faith? What do we believe as Christians? What are we required to believe?

For answers to those basic questions, we look to our Creeds. Creeds are not laws but rather rules of faith. Creeds are, as the BCP's Catechism says, "statements of our basic beliefs about God" (851). We have these statements because there have been times in church history when controversy has divided the church on matters of doctrine, so its leaders met to settle these basic questions of faith. Thus, we have creeds, or summaries of the faith. Mostly, the creeds address questions about the nature of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity.



Although we turn to our creeds to understand who God is, we must also realize that other very important matters of doctrine are not settled in our statements of faith (creeds). We use two creeds regularly in our worship. On Sundays and Major Feasts, when we celebrate Holy Eucharist, we say together the Nicene Creed (358). When we say Morning or Evening Prayer, baptize new Christians, or bury the dead, we say the Apostles' Creed (96).

According to tradition, the twelve articles of faith in the Apostles' Creed were written by the apostles themselves with each apostle contributing one statement. Modern scholars do not support this tradition, but its authorship is unknown. The most important thing for us to note is that the Apostles' Creed is deeply connected with Holy Baptism. We know that this ancient creed was used in the early church as people were baptized.

The Nicene Creed is largely an expansion of content similar to the Apostles' Creed. The Nicene Creed is named after Nicea, the place where the church in the year 325 AD held an ecumenical council, or worldwide gathering of bishops. The council, in response to certain divergent beliefs about Jesus, ratified the Nicene Creed. This creed was later modified and extended in 381 AD. The version that we say each Sunday is essentially the one that Christians around the world have said for more than 1,600 years.

Our creeds teach us about our faith in God. All the major creeds are organized along Trinitarian lines. In other words, there are sections on God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They generally do not delve into other matters. The creeds focus on the divinity and humanity of Jesus. They focus on God the creator of all that is. Words about the relationship of the three persons of God have been chosen very carefully. This is designed to help us avoid saying or teaching things that would lead to error.

People sometimes wonder about one line or another in the creed. For example, they may say, "I'm not sure about the virgin birth." People who take their faith seriously will inevitably have serious questions about our faith and our world. Many of these questions have an underlying question, "Do I really have to believe all this stuff we say?" We can, and should, use our intellect to probe the depth of our faith. But we should be ready also to join our voices with those of every generation who have taught the core beliefs of our faith.

The BCP also contains the Creed of Saint Athanasius (864). St. Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria, in Egypt, a very highly respected office in the first 300-400 years of the church. He was an influential figure at the Council of Nicea and later proceedings. This creed is an ancient document proclaiming the nature of the Incarnation and of God as Trinity.

You may also want to read The Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ, from the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD (864), which makes clear our belief that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

That completes today's discussion. I hope you enjoyed our time together. Next time we will present a very general overview of The Bible and how to read it. See you then.

In Christ, Deacon John

"Welcome to the Book of Common Prayer" by Vicki K. Black, Morehouse Publishing, 2005

"Walk in Love, Episcopal Beliefs & Practices" by Scott Gunn & Melody Wilson Shobe, Forward Movement, 2018

"Praying Shapes Believing, A Theological Commentary of the Book of Common Prayer" by Leonel L. Mitchell (updated by Ruth A. Meyers), Seabury Books, 2016