

We believe in one God...

Most Sundays we will share in a statement of faith. Often, we stand to say this together...often it's the Nicene creed... which begins We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,

It's a statement that (in its first form) dates to the 4th century Council of Nicaea. Now the place is called Iznik and it's in Turkey but in 325 it was the location of a council of bishops from across the Roman empire. Summoned by Constantine, the first Roman Emperor to allot Christianity the same tolerance as other religions, the first to become Christian himself. Constantine wanted to settle some matters on which there was disagreement. He wanted everyone singing from the same hymn sheet, wanted the church to celebrate Easter at the same time, for example... and amongst the ideas agreed was this statement. The first version of what we now call the Nicene creed.

This year we mark the 1700th anniversary of that council and its statement of faith. And today we begin exploring the core ideas in this creed. We start with the opening phrase...

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,

We believe... the text in our present service books and – indeed – the original text from the council at Nicaea – states faith in a corporate way. In between then and now, there was the Latin mass text... which began (classical music fans, you'll know this) *Credo* – I believe - and in Tudor times in the UK, the Book of Common Prayer continued with I believe (BCP services!) ... Now, with Common Worship, we have gone back to the original expression... we believe ... this is a thing we say together, it contains a faith we hold in common... it unites us as the body of Christ in the Hinkledux churches... and it unites us with Christians across the world (and across time...) cue Doctor Who music...

One God... the Nicene creed dates from a time when most religions people knew about and followed had lots of Gods, and there was also lots of choice... One person describes the time as offering a *Supermarket of religions*... In the Empire's heartlands, where the council of Nicaea was held, there was civic Roman religion with its special gods to protect the city (Artemis for Ephesus) ...and the Imperial Cult (worship of emperors). *Everyone* was expected to respect these. Then you also had the gods of the domestic sphere who protected hearth and home – you'd have a little altar in your house for them. And many people also subscribed to further options, like the cult of Mithras or one of the many philosophy/religion mixes like Neoplatonism and Manicheism. Christianity is different and the Nicene creed marks itself out from the beginning: we believe in one God...

Father... While (as we'll see in later weeks) the Nicene creed does use some language from its own time, most of it is deeply rooted in the text of the Bible...

The snatch from Isaiah that Alastair read describes God as Father... This is not unusual in the Old Testament... and it continues the teaching of Jesus... as we heard in that little picture from Matthew's gospel that Claire read... Don't most parents give their children good gifts, Jesus begins ... the things they ask for rather than the opposite (bread/stone,

fish/scorpion), Here, he contrasts the largely willing but limited ability of human fathers with the limitless grace of God, our heavenly father.

But in the 21st century, you may wonder why we are still talking about God as father... isn't that a bit old-school? After all, there are lots of instances in the Bible where God is shown as a mother figure, too. Isaiah 66: 13 *As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you;*

Let's note first that all this is human language, male and female are *created* categories, ... We know God is not like that – God is spirit and not created... We use these pictures of a father, or mother or shepherd (we heard that, too, in the reading from Isaiah) to help us understand, and speak about and to God better... When we use these words, we are saying God is not a thing... God is personal... is *someone*.... The point of the father - and indeed the mother - metaphor is to help us talk rightly about the kind of God who makes us in God's own image... who lavishes love and care on us... who adopts us as children... who knows us more deeply than we know ourselves...

And then there's another idea - and this was the central debate in the discussions at Nicaea in 325 - God is not just parent to all of us, but has a relationship that is described this way with Jesus... Jesus, who calls God Father and invites us to do the same... The council at Nicaea is tasked with answering a recent controversy centred on Arius, a priest from Alexandria... This is how Arius's thinking goes: we know that God is the sole unbegotten, eternal being... but if the God we call the Father has a son - Jesus Christ – who shares the Father's nature... surely that's 2 Gods... not one... ? Struggling with this, Arius seeks another way of talking about Christ... he says that Jesus *was* God, but not quite the same as Godself, that if you were thinking about a spectrum between divine and human, Jesus is perhaps a little bit nearer the human than divine end... It's this argument that stands behind the words that became the Nicene Creed, a version of which we will later say when we stand to affirm our faith this morning. We'll come back to this debate in later weeks... as we look at how the Nicene creed describes Jesus and answers Arius's ideas.

But today, we move on to the final word...

Almighty... this is, it might be said, the kind of God that Emperor Constantine was into... the God that was about power... The historian Eusebius says that Constantine expected the church to pray to God for the Emperor and the Empire... Eusebius even quotes a prayer to that effect that Constantine wrote for soldiers to say each Sunday. He never lost a battle, so I guess it worked for him!

But – as we observed not long ago – so many stories from the Bible remind us that this almighty God is one who speaks to God's people in a still small voice, rather than earthquake wind and fire... God is not just about obvious power... but also about relationship and connection and love.

One last question: does any of this have any practical meaning... does it affect our lived Christianity...?

When first agreed, what we call the Nicene creed was a kind of assurance statement by which the church measured its bishops. There was a paragraph at the end, which said that if you didn't hold this creed to be true you weren't part of the church In Eastenders language... you're barred! Technical term: anathema...

But while the Nicene creed started its life as a kind of international meeting
communique...and a test of orthodoxy, it has grown ... both in its content and its usage
.... to be considered a good way of expressing what people thought and still think and a
central element in our worshipping lives... something we gather around... Something
that – along with other elements of liturgy - can even help to draw us into faith, be part
of our turning to Christ... Something that connects us with Christians from Alaska to
Zimbabwe... as well as with the Christians from ancient Antioch to modern Zurich.