

15th June 2025, Reflection – The Creed (1): ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty’ CHURCH version

I believe. Two of the foundational words of our lives, certainly of our faith. I wonder what you think when you hear them? I believe. Maybe you think about saying a Creed in church every Sunday. Maybe you think about the moment you decided that you really did believe in Jesus. Or maybe there are other things in your head: the scene in the Polar express near the end when Chris the main character clutches the Christmas bell and says ‘I believe’. Or maybe the Frankie Laine song, written to lift the Spirits of ordinary Americans during the Korean War. And this song in many ways encapsulates the difficulty we have approaching this topic: ‘Every time I heard a new-born baby cry, or touch a leaf, or see the sky – then I know why I believe.’ It sounds great, doesn’t it, but what does it mean? Does it mean anything? ‘I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows.’ Really? I don’t!

Interestingly the earliest accounts of Jesus life place strikingly little emphasis on believing. It’s true that Jesus starts his ministry by saying: ‘The time has come and the kingdom of God has come near: repent and *believe* the good news.’ But in Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are just a handful of other mentions of believing in a positive sense, in fact just as many references are to those who did *not* believe. These gospel writers record Jesus as talking much more about *following* him – roughly twice as many times as believing. It’s really John, probably written later than the other gospels, who focuses more on belief, as the fundamental element of Jesus’ own teaching.

Indeed, perhaps the most powerful declaration of belief in the gospels is from the father of the boy who has fits who declares: ‘I do believe; help my unbelief!’ I think that’s a phrase that resonates powerfully with many of us, perhaps echoes the most basic prayer we want to pray to God often: ‘I do believe; help my unbelief!’

Today we begin a major new series on the Creed, which will guide us for the next 12 Sundays, through to the end of August. And in many ways, the words of that father form a sort of inspiration for our series, perhaps even a prayer to guide us through it: Lord, I *do* believe; help my unbelief. Over the next 12 Sundays we’ll look in detail at the core statements of the Christian faith and unpack why these form the foundation of our worldview. And it gives us the chance to bring our doubts and look afresh at the heart of our faith. We’ll look a little bit at the history (especially today and in a couple of early sessions), but mostly, we’ll look at the importance of each statement – *why* it matters, *what* it means for us, *how* it helps us to live as followers of Jesus. **And that’s the point: we believe so we can *follow*.** Faith into life, a day-to-day walk with Jesus.

But before we look at the first line – ‘I believe in God, the Father Almighty’ – let’s have a quick overview of how we ended up with a Creed at all, especially the one we’re looking at this series. When we read the New Testament, it’s easy to forget that we’re reading something dynamic and rapidly evolving: the story of a community working out the will of God in the light of the extraordinary revelation of Jesus Christ. How does it fit with the existing revelation of God through the pages of what we now call the Old Testament? How does God Almighty become human? What was effected through the example of Jesus’ life, and especially through his death and resurrection? How is the prophetic promise of God’s continuous presence with us worked out in the outpouring of the Spirit? What does it look like to be the people of God, to form communities of these new ‘Followers of the Way’? And as the good news of Jesus is shared, what are the absolute basics that people have to believe, to choose to live by?

Most scholars agree that what you might call the very earliest ‘Creed’ – from the Latin word *credo*, meaning ‘I believe’ – is just 3 words: **Jesus is Lord**. That’s really the heart of it – since Lord is the most fundamental name for God, we’re saying that Jesus is God in human form, and the one I’m going to obey and follow from now on. And whatever we cover over the next 12 weeks, if at the end of it you can say, with all your heart, ‘Jesus is Lord’, you’ve pretty much got the essence of what you need!

But as the church grew, it was natural to want to build a bigger structure on that cornerstone. Paul developed much of this early thought, with a focus on the meaning of what we now call Easter – writing in the mid to late 50s AD he said this in his letter to the Romans: ‘If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved.’ And, to the church in Corinth a couple of years earlier, he talks about the things of ‘first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and to the Twelve.’

As you’ll see, **this remains at the heart of all our accepted Creeds now. Jesus is Lord, the Son of God, and his death and resurrection changed everything.** But, over the first three centuries of the church, lots of debates took place and plenty of popular teachings caused confusion. For example, some famous leaders wanted to junk much of the Old Testament; others wanted to emphasise only the spiritual and reject the physical nature of our existence, or even of Jesus’ existence. Most of all, people debated whether Jesus could really be fully God *and* fully human, and was part of the divine Trinity since the very beginning. A chap called Arius in particular taught that Jesus must have been created, therefore, although he was divine, he wasn’t eternal, and he wasn’t on a par with God the Father. It was this teaching that led the Emperor Constantine to convene the Council at Nicaea in 325AD, calling all bishops from across the church to gather and thrash this out. In the end, they agreed a statement of faith: what became known as the first Nicene Creed.

And here I need to admit a couple of things: first, not all bishops attended. It was by far the largest gathering of church leaders ever, with over 300 attending at least some of it, but some of the Western bishops refused to come because it was held in the East near Constantinople. Second, what we now think of as the Apostles Creed isn’t exactly the same as the one agreed at Nicea. About two thirds is the same, but a simplified and consolidated version, based on the Nicene Creed, known as the Apostles’ Creed, became popular about 100 years later, and this is the one we tend to use. The reason is that the last part of the original creed from 325 has lots of stuff about Arius’ teachings, which became less relevant once that debate was resolved. (TURN TO SHEET – go through items included, the simplified understanding of Jesus’ identity, and ones which were added at the end to replace the Arian bit.) But don’t let that undermine the fundamental importance of this document. **For the first time, a broad coalition of the whole Church agreed the core of what Christians believe. And it’s still the heart today** – we still use this Creed (and the other longer versions developed through the 4th century) as the touchstone of solid, reliable, Christian faith. If something that calls itself a ‘church’ doesn’t sign up to the Creed, you know it’s dodgy!

As an aside, the council also did a number of other things – confirmed the date of Easter, or at least the principles for working out the date, which is more or less how we do it now. They also passed lots of resolutions which give us a fascinating insight into how faith was practised in the early fourth century: some are sensible, like weeding out ministers who hadn’t been properly trained or examined, others are more striking: for example, anyone who sought preparation for baptism and didn’t follow through with it, had to attend regularly for 3 years before they could put themselves forward again; soldiers who wanted to return to the army after professing faith were to be excommunicated (the early church was essentially a pacifist movement) and kneeling for prayers was banned for all Sunday worship and during Easter season – these were deemed to be times of joy and celebration, kneeling for prayer was understood primarily to be for penitence. Make of those what you will. But I digress...

So how does this Creed start – with one simple but hugely significant word: we can call God Father. This comes from Jesus’ own teaching and represents a revolution in our understanding of God. It’s natural to think of God as someone big and scary – Ruler, Judge, and of course ‘Almighty’ – as we also see in this first line – that’s derived from a key Jewish name for God ‘El Shaddai’ which means ‘Lord of hosts’ and is usually translated ‘Almighty’. But this God is also our Divine Parent.

As we've been looking at all through the season from Ascension to Pentecost, with the 'Thy Kingdom Come' material, the prayer Jesus taught us tells us to call God Father – literally 'Father of us'. We can relate to this great big God on terms of intimacy, as a child to their parent.

And although many people have to navigate this word through their inadequate experiences of their own human father – perhaps absent, perhaps distant, perhaps abusive – we all carry images of what a great parent, a great father feels like. And a part of the journey of our spiritual lives is for us to allow God to be this kind of parent to us, and also for us. A parent who, as Jesus tells us in our first passage today, doesn't need to be pleaded with because he loves us and wants the best for us, and who also knows us so well, he knows what we need before we ask him. A parent we can approach directly in our home and not only in religious buildings.

And also, as we see in our second passage, a Father who gives all of his authority to Jesus, who then passes that on to us. Through Jesus, God the Father makes the fullness of himself known to us. Wow! What a thought. God the Father is not the boss of the family business who can't let go – he hands over the work of his kingdom business to Jesus and his followers.

So, on this Father's Day, whatever that looks like for you in human terms, let's begin our series on the Creed by celebrating our true Divine Parent: who knows us, loves us, provides for us, shields us, and releases all we need to flourish. **A Father who, in Jesus, says to each of us: *you* are my beloved daughter; *you* are my beloved son.... I believe in God, the Father Almighty... Amen.**