

# The different “persons” of our God

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Trinity Sunday 2022 Proverbs 8:1 -4, 22-31, Psalm 8, Romans 5:1 – 5, John 16:12-15

“...we have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ...God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:1, 5)

You may have noticed that we have included in the order of service today the Nicene Creed, which we normally omit on the Sunday we offer the Healing ministry in our more formal way. But of course it is Trinity Sunday, and our readings focus on the different “persons” of our God,. So it is important for us on this day to recite together this expanded form of the doctrine of the Trinity that was agreed to at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon in the 4th and 5th centuries.

What are we doing when we recite a creed? In a few weeks we will have a Baptism at this service, and those who are bringing the baby for Baptism will be asked to answer on the child’s behalf, “Do you believe in God the Father?...Do you believe in God the Son?...Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” And in each case they will answer with the appropriate paragraph from the so-called “Apostles Creed”. After this all of us will be challenged, “This is the faith of the Church” and we will respond, “This is our faith, We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” “the Faith of the Church”; “our faith” – what does it mean?

When we use the Nicene Creed nowadays, we use the original beginning, “We believe...” The Apostles Creed has always been a statement of personal faith “I believe...” But how does it relate to my own understanding of God’s action and God’s

nature? I grew up in the Methodist Church, and in a tradition which was always rather suspicious of the Roman Catholic Church, so I remember struggling as a young man with the phrase in the Apostles Creed "I believe in ...the holy Catholic Church" – could I really say that with integrity? In fact the Methodist Communion service amended this expression to "the holy *Christian* Church".

On Trinity Sunday in days gone by, the Prayer Book ordered that instead of either of these creeds, we should recite "the confession of faith known as the Athanasian creed". This is still printed in A Prayer Book for Australia, right up the back, but it is a long time since I have heard it used in public. It begins in an uncompromising way, "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly". It then goes on in complex philosophical language to make statements about what God's nature is and what it is not. This statement of right belief sets our "believing" in the context of everlasting salvation, and affirms that this salvation depends on our accepting as right belief all that this statement sets out.

One problem is that each of these "creeds" – "I believe"s – is couched in the language of its time, along with the philosophical background of that language. However, this language does not always reveal or express the truth of God in terms that people of a different age might use. But rather than have each generation write a new statement, we continue to use these historical statements and say, in effect, "I want to assert that I belong to the same faith community that developed this statement." We remember, too, that the statements were developed in the context of controversy about what was genuine, authentic Christian belief – a belief that would place its believers in the ambit of the saving, reconciling work of Jesus. And because the agreed statements

were meant to address the ideas that were thought inauthentic, they place what we would see as a rather unbalanced stress on certain aspects of their statements – all that “God from God, Light from Light, ...begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father” all contradict particular aspects of what they saw as false beliefs.

But this whole concept of “right belief” or “orthodoxy” or “Catholick Faith” is used to *exclude* rather than include – Nicaea asserted that those who are “in” say that Jesus is “of the same nature” as God, and any who would dare say Jesus is “of a similar nature” to God are “out”. The whole approach which divides people into those who are “in” and those who are “out” is one which has a long and deeply biblical background. It took a revolution for Jewish people to accept that God’s purposes were not simply for them but for the whole of the created order. There were hints of this wider reference from time to time, but the dominant theme was one of separation, of being chosen, favoured, entitled. (A bit like the attitudes of some of the British settlers to the indigenous people in our own land!) The early Christians struggled mightily with the question of whether following Christ demanded becoming an observant Jew first. Christian history, too, is full of stories of people who were not simply excluded, but even killed because their beliefs and practices were not those of the dominant group – carefully expressed in terms of orthodoxy of belief, but often underlying that were questions of power – “I have the power here; you will believe what I believe, or else!”

When we recite a creed today, though, our aim is not so much to exclude people as to assert our unity with those who have held the faith of Jesus Christ down the ages. Today we are wanting to say that we are “in”, while at the same time not wanting to claim that everyone else is “out”. We are prepared to recognize that truth can be expressed in many ways, and that a person’s integrity carries more weight than

their stated beliefs. And this, of course, is in line with the predominant philosophy of our age! We have been able to find support for this way of working in the biblical record, although this interpretation is still contested by some. Many of us find comfort in the words in this morning's Gospel reading, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth..." We have come to understand that this process of "guiding" has stretched out over the centuries, and we believe that some of the things that Jesus has had to say to us have taken a long time for us to "bear"!

So, on this Trinity Sunday, let us give thanks to the God of grace for calling us into the fellowship of "the Spirit of truth", and that this Spirit has continued to guide us closer to the fulness of the truth.