

Nicene Creed Sermon Series: *Sermon #3*: July 14-15, 2018

Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen.

Welcome to the third installment of our ongoing series on the Nicene Creed. Before I offer a brief review of our last two weeks though, I would like to say how proud I am of you, saints. This is not a light topic, to say the least. It can be hard to sit through this kind of teaching sermon. As St. Paul put it, we are learning to chew spiritual meat so that we can mature in the faith, and learning to eat solid food is hard work, but you have been engaged and attentive, so well done, saints! May the Lord grant all of us increased faith and understanding as we continue in this hard work.

Now to the review. The first week we looked at the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, as I made a case that 1) the Shema was a creed inherited by the Church through the writings of St. Paul and the teaching of Jesus, and 2) as such, the Church was on solid footing when she taught and professed her faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. You can find this sermon in the sermon rack in the narthex. Last week we returned to the Shema to see that not only was verse 4 a creed that teaches us who God is, it also teaches us who we are. If he is our God and he has done great things for us, then we are his people, the people whom he has saved through his mighty deeds. Because of this, not only are we to worship only God, we are also commanded to teach these things to our children and grandchildren through the teaching of the Creed and the ordering of our lives around love for God – what we call liturgy. And I said the Creed operates the same way for the Church. I also told you there were three ways that the Creed trains us to love the Lord our God: 1) It teaches us the content of the faith – who our God is, and who we are in relation to him. As part of this, it teaches us to read Scripture; 2) It forms us into a community with a shared

memory of a shared history, and in so doing, it teaches that our walk with the Lord is dependent on other saints; and 3) it functions as the Church's pledge of allegiance to the King of Kings, Jesus Christ.

This week I want to spend some time unpacking the first of the three training functions of the Creed – namely, that it teaches us the content of the faith and, thus, how to read Scripture. Now this may seem an odd thing to say, that we need to learn to read Scripture. It may especially seem so to those of us with more Protestant and Evangelical backgrounds. In these traditions, it is often – though certainly not always – assumed that one need only pick up the Scriptures and start reading in order to understand them. But is this actually the case? A corollary to this assumption is that we can only come to faith in Jesus by reading the Scriptures, most especially the New Testament. But is this actually the case? What if you don't have the Scriptures/the New Testament? What if you can't read?

Before I get to those issues, let me make a few things clear in order to avoid confusion. I am an Anglican priest and am bound to the 39 Articles of Religion, which is the closest thing that we Anglicans have to a confession of faith.¹ In Article VI, it is stated that "Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation," and that anything that cannot be found in or proved by Scripture cannot be required of any person for their salvation. This is a statement of doctrine that I gladly conform to and teach. The doctrine flows out of the understanding that Scripture is part of God's self-revelation to humanity after the fall – to use the words of Scripture about itself, it is God breathed. Along these same lines, Anglicans have historically understood Scripture to ultimately have one Author. Yes human beings put pen to paper. Yes human beings used their own voices, thoughts, and experiences to craft their letters and books; in this sense the Scriptures

¹ You can find the 39 Articles of Religion in the back of the *1979 Book of Common Prayer* in the Historical Documents. You can also find them on the Internet.

are thoroughly the work of human hands. *However*, we believe that God the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit was illuminating and inspiring these human writers to such an extent that we can say that the Scriptures are God breathed *and* that they ultimately have one Author.

This understanding leads to the affirmations of Article VII: The first affirmation is that the Old Testament is not jettisoned now that we have the New Testament; rather, both Testaments held *together* are Holy Scripture. Why? Because they have the same Author *and the same Subject*. As the Article puts it: "both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man." It is Christ Jesus who is the Subject of all of Scripture, both the Old and New Testament.

Both articles taken together clearly demonstrate that, for Anglicans, Scripture is the primary source of authority for salvation and thus religious life – against it all theological claims are to be judged. But Anglicans, along with other catholic traditions, understand that we need both *sanctified* Reason and Tradition to fully see the Subject matter of Scripture. In something of a paradox, we must first know Jesus in faith to see Jesus clearly in the Scriptures.

For an example of what I mean, look at John 5: 39-47 with me, you can find it on p. 1064-65 in your pew bibles. The context here is that Jesus has just healed a blind man on the Sabbath. Instead of rejoicing, the Jewish leaders harass the man healed and want to know who would break the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy – a commandment given in Scripture but often misinterpreted by the Jewish leaders. In response, Jesus chastises them for not understanding who he is. Even though they see the works that he is doing *with* the Father, because they don't see with the eyes of faith, they don't truly see. His judgment comes to a climax in verses 39-47:

"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about me; and you are unwilling to come to me so that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Notice that the leaders hope to find salvation in the Scriptures; they read them to find eternal life. But they miss it because they don't recognize that the Scriptures testify about Jesus, in whom alone eternal life is found. In other words, they point beyond themselves to him. Jesus goes on to identify why they can't see him: they don't love him – that is, they don't have faith to see him. And then Jesus points out the irony of it all. These Jewish leaders think they believe Moses, who was the giver of the Law – including to keep the Sabbath holy – but they don't. If they did, they would believe in Jesus whom Moses was writing about. Even though they had and read the Scriptures, they could not find the Salvation that they point to because they did not have faith and as such their Reason wasn't sanctified and they were outside the Tradition, which always included Jesus, hence, his own words about Moses. As a consequence of all three problems, they didn't actually know how to read Scripture because they didn't know its Subject: the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. We might say, then, they needed to be taught.

This takes us back to the point, we all must be taught to properly read Scripture, that is, to see and understand the Subject of Scripture, Jesus Christ. The Creed serves in this function in two ways, both of which are true because it is, what the Patristics called, the Rule of Faith. Several questions arise at this point: First, what is a Rule of Faith? Historically speaking it has been understood as a distillation of the orthodox faith – orthodox in the sense of true – which has

been handed down from Jesus to the Apostles and eventually to us. In one sense, then, it and the Scriptures are the same, as the Rule is taught in the Scriptures and is derived out of them. But in another sense, it is outside the Scriptures too, in part because ultimately Jesus Christ is the Rule of Faith, but also because the Rule predates the completion and codification of the New Testament at Nicea. As Paul and the other Apostles traveled around the Mediterranean sharing the Good News of the Gospel, the faith they taught was being distilled into memorizable creeds that were then handed down from one generation to the next, even as the Epistles and Gospels were being written. These were expanded overtime and became more universal until they eventually became the Nicene Creed.

This brings us to the second question: How does one come to have the faith needed to read the Scriptures well? Ultimately faith comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit. But generally speaking, this happens in conjunction with "hearing, and hearing by the word of God." While we must affirm that the Scriptures are the inspired word of God, we need not presume that one only hears the word by reading the words written the bible. In fact, most of us are first encountered by the word outside the text of Scripture. This can happen in various ways. To name only one example, think back to our discussion of the Shema. Moses tells parents and grandparents to teach his commandments to their children/grandchildren. Recall that we said the content of this teaching was to be the credal faith – who God is and who they are in relation to him. Recall also that they are to teach this faith by talking to their kids throughout the day. The textual element doesn't disappear; they are to write his words on their doorposts and to bind them on their heads and arms. But to those who do not already have the faith, either the next generation or outsiders, the faith is handed over through spoken testimony. A little closer to home, my firstborn son, John-Paul, is three. He cannot read, but he believes that Jesus loves him, that Jesus is God, and

most importantly, he loves Jesus. He has heard the word of God through our teaching him the *Rule of Faith* – that is, the distillation of the faith proclaimed in the Creed. And I am sure that many of you have had the same experience yourselves or with your own kids. So in the first instance, we can say that the Creed, as the Rule of Faith, helps us to read Scripture by helping us to faithfully hand over the faith by giving us the basic, nonnegotiable elements of the Apostolic faith.

Now to be clear, this does not in anyway minimize the importance of reading the text of Scripture itself. The Rule of Faith/Creed is a distillation of the faith, and as such, it is not the *complete* faith. To be mature in the faith, we must learn to read and meditate on the word day and night until we come to see Jesus face-to-face in and through it. We must be shaped by Scripture, judged by it, taught by it, all with the hope of being drawn into deeper union with Christ Jesus so that we might look more like him and be a light to the world.

This, of course, leads to the third and final question: How does the Creed, as the Rule of Faith, teach us to read Scripture properly? Simply put, it teaches us to see the Subject of Scripture, Jesus Christ. Think back to our discussion of John 5 just a few minutes ago. Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders for reading Scripture but not seeing that it was about him. That it is all about him is not necessarily self-evident though, we have to be taught that it is. St. Irenaeus, the second-century Bishop of Lyons, explains it this way: The Scriptures are like a mosaic, that is, an ancient form of art that was a painting on whole bunch of tiles that when put together in the proper order formed a picture. Irenaeus uses the example of a mosaic of a King. The Trick though, is that the artist paints it at home so it must be shipped and thus disassembled and eventually reassembled in its new home. If we don't have the proper instructions (in other words, the hypothesis or *rule*) when we are reassembling it, instead of a King, we may put it back

together as a fox. The problem for the Jewish leaders is that they put the picture back together as the fox instead of the King; they missed the real Subject.

And so it is for us. We must learn to properly identify the King throughout the whole of Scripture, in both the Old and New Testament, in the wisdom literature as well as the Epistles, in the historical and prophetic books as well as the Gospels. All of it is about King Jesus, and reading in light of the Creed, as the Rule of Faith, helps us to properly see him for who he is. Notice too, that if we know what the Scriptures are about because of the Creed, we also know what they are not about because of the Creed. In other words, the Creed as the Rule of Faith, gives us boundaries when we read and interpret Scripture. If we are reading a passage and we think we come up with a meaning that clearly contradicts the Creed, we can trust that our interpretation is wrong. And, this is true of preaching too; in our liturgy the Creed comes after the readings and the sermon so that we can measure the sermon against it. Think of the plumb line from our reading in Amos. If my sermon contradicts the Creed, then it is not faithful and should be discarded and I may need to be reported to the Bishop who is a defender of the Faith given to him in the Creed.

I meant to leave enough time to give several examples of how this interaction between Creed as Rule of Faith and Scripture practically works, but I didn't, so two will have to suffice. First, one familiar enough to many of us that we won't turn there, and that is Jesus' baptism, which is recounted Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In all three Gospels, when Jesus comes up out of the water the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove and a voice is heard saying, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased." As Christians who have been trained in the faith of the Creed, we think of this as a self-evident example of the Trinity. But is it really? In the first several centuries of the Church, before the Council of Nicea, this passage was read by many

within the Church as proof that Jesus was a man who was adopted as the Son of God when the Holy Spirit came upon him. In other words, according to these theologians, Jesus wasn't the Incarnate Word of God in human flesh; instead, he was a man like you and me who was elevated to a semi-divine status through adoption. Eventually this particular heresy and others were defeated through careful examination of the Scriptures and sound reasoning so that today, as heirs of the Nicene Creed as the Rule of Faith, we instinctively read the account of Jesus' Baptism as a picture of the Trinity, as we well should.

One final example from the Old Testament. Turn with me to Proverbs 8:22-36, which you can find on p. 647. Reading from St. Paul's statement that Jesus is the Wisdom of God, the early Church took this entire chapter of Proverbs to be not only about Jesus, but the pre-Incarnate Word, speaking. Let me read it to you, and then we will look to see how this interpretation is opened to us in the Creed. [read] Notice that Solomon has personified Wisdom in this chapter as he speaks for himself in the first person. This personification of Wisdom is unique in the wisdom literature. Look also with me at verse 22-23: "²²The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his way, before his works of old. ²³From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth." Interestingly, this word for "possessed" in Hebrew can also be translated begot, a word that we find describing the Son's relationship to the Father in the Creed: the Son is, "eternally begotten of the Father." In fact, the eternity of Wisdom is expressed here too: For one, the beginning of the Lord's way is eternal, as he has no beginning or end, and for two, Wisdom explicitly says, "*from everlasting* I was established." Finally, verses 25-31 describe Wisdom's involvement in the divine act of Creating, an agency we find explicitly affirmed of the Son in the Nicene Creed: "Through him all things were made." In just these few highlights, we get a glimpse of how reading from the Creed as the Rule of Faith reveals the subject of Scripture

to us. By reading with the affirmations of the Creed, we can see that Wisdom here in Proverbs 8 is the Word made flesh, the "only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father," Jesus Christ, the true picture of the King in the mosaic.

So with that saints, let us stand together and profess our faith in the one Subject of Scripture with the words of the Nicene Creed.