

Nicene Creed Sermon Series: *Sermon #1*: June 30 – July 1, 2018

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

Well as I am sure you are aware, Fr. Ward is away for the next few weeks on vacation. In fact, after being back in our midst for a couple weeks while Rebecca and I hopefully welcome Theboy number 3, Fr. Ward will leave for another couple weeks of vacation. This means you get five weeks of me preaching over the next 2 months or so. For those of you who may be visiting, I am not the head pastor, or what we Anglicans call the Rector; I am the number 2 and am thus not the primary preacher. Five weeks in such a short time frame is unusual for a number 2, so I thought I would take advantage of it and preach my own sermon series.

Over the course of the summer, I will be preaching on the Nicene Creed – a subject that doesn't seem to often get its own direct attention, although one would hope that our normal sermons would find their home someplace in the affirmations of the Creed. My intention is to spend this week addressing why a Creed and what it does. Next week, I will address the interplay between the Creed and Scripture. And I will conclude the series by addressing each of the three articles in their own designated weeks; that is, the Father one week, the Son the next, and finally, the Holy Spirit. This is the plan at least; we shall see how it goes. I think there is an expression someplace about good intentions or the best laid plans of mice and men.

As this is a huge topic with roughly 1600 years of writing and debate by the best minds of the Church behind it, the trick will be keeping each sermon bite-sized – for both of our sakes. This means that I will not be able to say much of what can be said or should be said about the Creed. One aspect that will slip to the wayside will be its historical development. And for at least

today's sermon, I will attempt to keep my argument more constructive than argumentative. Meaning, I will, as best as I am able, resist the urge to take on the arguments against a having a codified Creed – no mean feat for a preacher as feisty as myself (my poor wife might use a different word than feisty...pray for her). It also means that I will attempt to not address the many and various problems in today's Church that might benefit from a more robustly Creedal faith. Though to be clear, I do think that in a society and Church that are hyper-individualized and have made the Self the primary seat of authority, a return to the historic practices of the Church with respect to the Creed would be beneficial to say the least; of course this perspective will seep out in the sermon, it just wont get its own attention.

I think that is enough about my agenda, now its time to implement it. I invite you to turn in your pew bibles to Deut 6, which you can find on p. 191. This may seem an odd place to turn for a sermon making a case for the Nicene Creed. And it may be, but what I hope to show us is that the use of a Creed has a longstanding, even God-ordained history in the life of God's people, of which the Church is a continuation. It simply is not the case that the Church invented something new when it started teaching and writing its beliefs in the form of Creeds – she shares this practice as well as her liturgy with her older brother, Israel. In fact, what we will see in Deut 6 is that not only does the Creed belong within a liturgical context, but that it also has implications that go well beyond corporate worship.

Here in chapter 6 we find Moses and Israel standing at the precipice of the Promised Land. Moses, the prophet all other prophets are to imitate, is giving his farewell address to the people before the Lord takes him our of their midst. The book is called Deut, which means second giving, because as part of his address Moses is re-giving the Law and thus renewing the covenant between God and his people. Thus in chapter 5 Moses repeats the Ten Commandments.

Interestingly though, in the life of the Jewish people, it is chapter 6, and more specifically verses 4-9, that takes on utmost importance. Why is that? Because it is identity making. It names the two parties of the covenant, and in the case of Israel it defines them and their corporate life with God. I am getting ahead of myself, so let's turn to the text.

Look quickly with me at verses 1-3 [read them]. Briefly, in verse 1 Moses tells the people that he is delivering a command that he received directly from God, a command that they are to live out in while they inhabit the Promised Land. In verse 2, Moses tells them that if they obey this command and teach it from one generation to the next, their days will be prolonged. What we miss in the English translation is that in Hebrew Moses uses the plural form of the word "you" in verse 1 and the singular form in verse 2. The implication is that even while he is addressing the corporate body, the individual families present have a responsibility to obey and hand down the commandments to the younger generations. Notice too, this is a multigenerational affair: it is to you, your son, and your grandson. Both parents and grandparents are on the hook, but so too are children and grandchildren.

And so we come to verse 4. This verse, together with the following 5 verses, is commonly referred to as the *Shema*. It is called this because in Hebrew the first words are "*Shema Israel*," "Hear, Israel." Overtime the liturgical element referred to as the Shema came to also include Deut 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. However, what makes this opening verse distinct is that it identifies the two parties involved in the covenant, the Lord and Israel. And it does so by making a Creedal statement – that is, "a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion." "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"

There are several things we should notice about this statement. First, in the Hebrew it does not say "the Lord" it says God's proper name (what we might call his legal name), which he

gave to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3: "I Am Who I Am" or, "I Will Be Who I Will Be." So holy is this name and so great the fear of taking it in vein, the Jews developed the practice of substituting in the word "Lord" (*adonia* in Hebrew, *kurios* in Greek), a practice that the Church has historically kept in place, hence its usage here in this translation. This practice has immense theological significance when we think about who Jesus is, which we shall see in just a minute.

Second, the inclusion of God's legal name itself has theological significance. It says something about who God is in his very being, in much the same way that our Nicene Creed does; in fact, more than one commentator has made this same connection. Indeed, the Church through her history has understood God's name (I Am Who I Am) to be an affirmation of not only his complete and utter uniqueness; but also a statement about his being the ultimate source of all reality. As the Anglican bible scholar Richard Bauckham has shown, Jews understood God's name and its inclusion in the Shema in the same way: it was a statement about who he is in his very being and about the relationship of everything else to him.

Third, and finally, the second clause, "the Lord is One," at minimum puts additional emphasis on God's uniqueness. This is especially true when consider verse 5's command of complete worship. If we love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, and might, there is no room for competing loves. We are to be completely devoted to and faithful to the Lord because he alone is worthy of it; he alone is worthy of our complete and utter allegiance. Christian theologians in the first several centuries of the Church who were grappling with God's uniqueness in light of the coming of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, took this statement of God's oneness to be a statement of God's *simplicity*. A technical word that means that God exists without parts. This concept has helped us to understand God's being as Triune – he is always throughout his whole

being, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the seeds for what we affirm in the Nicene Creed regarding the Trinity are found here in this early Jewish Creed.

Lest you think I have arbitrarily chosen the Shema as kind of Jewish prototype for the Christian Creeds, I want to quickly show you two examples of it being brought into the New Testament as an early Christian Creed: one from St. Paul and one from Jesus himself. Lets start with St. Paul. So, keep a finger here, because we will be back, and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 8, p. 1146. What I want us to see is twofold: 1) I want us to see New Testament precedence for having a Creed, and 2) for reading the Shema as one, albeit one that needs to be adapted in light of Christ Jesus.

Look at verses 5 and 6: "⁵ For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him." In context Paul is addressing the issue of idolatry, that is, the worship of created beings as though they are diving beings worthy of love and allegiance. Not only does Paul tell his readers that such beings do not exist (v. 4), but even if they did, those of us who have received the Shema as Creed know them to be inferior to the One God. Paul makes this clear by picking up all the words of the Greek translation of the Shema in the Septuagint and restating them here in 1 Corinthians 8.

We must notice, though, that Paul makes several modifications. First he amplifies God's divinity and otherness, his transcendence and sovereignty, by highlighting that he has created all things for himself and that as the source of all being, all things exist only in and through God, including created things that are falsely worshipped. Paul takes two extra steps though; One, he includes Jesus in the divine Being by including him in the supremely divine activity of creation –

"Jesus, by whom are all things, and we exist through him." Two, recall my comment above about the Jewish practice of substituting the Greek and Hebrew word for "Lord" in place of God's legal name. In this light, by stating that Jesus is Lord here in verse 6, Paul isn't saying that Jesus is the boss; rather, he is saying that Jesus is God. But not another god alongside the God identified in the Shema; he is saying that Jesus is YHWH, the credal/covenantal God of the Shema! St. Paul, here in 1 Corinthians 8, is stating matter-of-factly that Jesus and the Father are of One Being, *and* that Jesus was already existent as YHWH in the giving of the Shema to Moses in Deut 6:4. Of course there is more to say, but this will have to suffice for now. We may come back to this when we discuss the Creed and Scripture in a later sermon.

For now, turn with me to Mark 12:28-33, p. 1011 in your pew bibles. This one won't require as much unpacking, as it is more straightforward, so take a deep breath and take heart; we are coming to the end. Now look at verse 28-33 with me [read it]. Notice that in verse 28 Jesus is quoting Duet 6:4 before verse 5, which is the command to only worship the Lord. By doing so Jesus, on the one hand, as the Word made flesh is validating the Creedal statement that the Lord is One even as he challenges this very affirmation as the second person of the Trinity in Incarnate form. This is significant because it is Jesus' Incarnation that pressures Paul to make the modifications to the Shema that we just noted, and yet, here is Jesus validating the very Creed he forces Paul to wrestle with after he knocks him off his high horse on the way to Damascus. On the other hand, by stating the matter of belief first, Jesus is demonstrating the interlocking of faith and love/action. An interlocking we shall explore further when we return to the Deuteronomy 6:6-9.

In both of these New Testament examples, one from St. Paul and one from Jesus, we see the Shema brought into the continuing people of God, the Church. Indeed, we see both Jesus and

Paul use and interpret the Shema as a Creed, that is, as a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion. The Church, then, did not invent something new by developing and codifying its beliefs about God in Creedal form. In fact, we can say that they were employing a practice that Jesus himself endorsed during his earthly ministry, or more poignantly, a practice that Jesus himself revealed to Moses in the giving of the Shema. The Church, then, is on good footing when she teaches and proclaims her faith by the words of the Nicene Creed, assuming of course that the faith in the Creed is true, which we take it to be. We will have to wait to make that defense in another sermon though.

I had intended to go back to Deuteronomy 6:6-9 and look at the relationship between faith and action/love and then to address three purposes of the Creed, but I think that would be too much for this week. So I will wait to do that next week. In the meantime, I challenge you, saints, to go read the Shema (Deut 6:4-9) and 1 Corinthians 8:1-6. Meditate on them and the Nicene Creed. Ask the Lord to increase your love for him as you seek to understand who he is through the revelation of Scriptures and the Creed. And as you trust that your love for him will increase, and saints, that is the true application of any sermon – that our love for the Lord and our neighbors would increase – ask him to shape you more and more into his image and likeness for the life of the world!

And with that, let us stand together and profess our faith in the Lord of the Shema with the words of the Nicene Creed, which you can find on p. 45 of your red prayer books.