

**Epiphany 3**  
**26/1/2014**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Exodus 3:1-6**

**Psalm 105**

**1 Corinthians 8:1-6**

**John 1:1-14**

(Off RCL)

### **How Christians Believe**

God, History and the Geometry of the Creed

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When it comes to thinking about the Christian faith, the problem of not being able to see the wood for the trees is considerable. For the modern mind, although not much less so for the ancient mind, there are many individual aspects of Christian confession which jar our sense for what can and cannot be. It is far from uncommon even for believers when saying the creed, at least to feel uncomfortable if not actually to fall silent at certain parts. The “trees” – the details of the confession – are often problematic even if there is a general willingness to confess some of the less detailed, less specific aspects of faith.



Over the next few weeks we will consider together the question, “How Christians believe”, drawing on the classic Christian confession as it is laid out in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, treating them as being essentially the same statement of faith. This will not be an enquiry into how it is possible to believe, and we will also not be dealing directly with many of the specific statements of belief in the Creed itself. (So far as the content goes, there are some very good resources you can pick up from the resources table which deal in more detail with individual aspects of the Creed).

Our emphasis will be rather more on the *manner* of Christian faith, considering Christian confession as less a matter of content than as a matter of “style.” This is, of course, plenty of important content but I suspect that the style question is the more important one at this juncture.

To begin our thinking around this, I draw your attention to the curious graphic on the front of the pew sheet is this morning. It is not a printing error! If you have not yet worked out what it is, it is the text of the Nicene creed “blocked out”, so that we might see “the wood for the trees” – the “shape” of Christian confession – without being distracted by any particular detail. For there is much communicated by what we might call the geometry of the Creed.

Presented in this way, two things are immediately communicated about the Creed. The first is that it has three parts. To believers this is familiar enough, reflecting the Trinitarian confession of the church. We will reflect more specifically on the trinitarian dimension in the next few weeks. Today we will simply notice and reflect on the second obvious thing in this presentation of the Creed: the relative sizes of each of the three so-called “articles”. Formatted on the basis of one main clause per line, the first article has three lines, the third has nine lines, and the second has seventeen lines. This speaks volumes about “how Christians believe”.

We are taught by the tradition of the church that God is to be worshiped as three “persons”, each of which (or whom) is equally divine, all three together constituting God as a Trinity (or tri-unity). And yet if we look to the geometry of the Creed we see that these three equal persons take up very different amounts of space, if not in God Godself, at least “on paper”! “God the Father” – in most trinitarian doctrine the something like the “source” of the godhead – is accorded almost cursory acknowledgement; “God the Holy Spirit” has more associated with its personhood; and “God the Son” is runaway winner in the word count.

Again, the details – the “trees” – are not our main concern here but the forest as a whole. The “easy” religious concepts of “(a) god” and of “spirit” are only briefly attended to. The reason that the middle section incorporates so much is that it is, religiously, the most problematic.

It is clear enough to most that the Creed is formulated as a summary of Christian confession. But what is less to the fore in our thinking is that it was formulated in an unfriendly religious environment. That environment knew very well about God – about *theos* – and about Spirit – *pneuma* – but it had great difficulty with the notion that the crucified Jesus could have anything to do with true divinity. As the Creed plants its various trees, makes its various statements about the faith of the church, it is building up a forest which declares in uncompromising terms that, in fact, the Word which was “with God” and “was God” has indeed become flesh (to recall our reading from John’s gospel this morning).

And so, as we look to the second article of the Creed, we might read with the following polemical emphasis:

We believe in *one* Lord, *Jesus* Christ,  
the *only* Son of God,  
*eternally* begotten of the Father,  
*God* from God, *Light* from Light,  
*true* God from true God, *begotten*, *not* made,  
of *one Being* with the Father;  
through *him* all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation *he* came down from heaven,  
was *incarnate* by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin *Mary* and became *truly* human.  
For our sake he was *crucified* under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered *death* and was buried.  
On the third day *he* rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
*he* ascended into heaven and is seated  
at the right hand of the Father.  
*He* will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and *his* kingdom will have no end.

Exactly where the emphasis might be placed in any particular clause could be debated, but it is most likely that where *we today* tend to assume the emphasis should fall will miss the point. This is because we are not living out of the tensions which gave us the Creed in this form. For us the problem with “he rose again” is the word “rose”; to the fourth century religious mind the thing is that, if anything is going to be raised, it will not be a crucified man. For us the problem with “born of the virgin Mary” is “virgin”. The ancients also had a problem with this, but the bigger problem was the word “Mary”, and the following assertion that true Godness had become “truly human”. For us the problem with “He will come again” is that we cannot conceive what this coming could be. In its original religious context the problem is that the crucified Jesus is the least of us; how could *he* be our judge? How could it be *his* kingdom which will have no end? When we recite (or sing!) the Creed, we are not listing the things we (kind of) believe about God and Jesus. We are engaging in a polemic, a debate, about the nature of the world and its relationship to God. In a context where the divine was considered inviolable, incapable of interacting fully with the changing, decaying world, the Creed declares exactly the opposite: in the Crucified One we see the true range and power of Divinity.

Now, this might all seem like a lot of theological irrelevance, particularly to those for whom the existence (or not) of God is itself an irrelevance. Yet the problem which has given our Creed its geometry – the tension between the biggest things which are easy and the smallest things which are hard to fit in – is not merely a theological question. The relationship between the wood and the trees is ever present, whether it looks like a theological question or not. We have heard in the news this week about the way in which “Big Sugar” has, in Cambodia blithely swept away the interests of hundreds of subsistence farmers. Here, simple god of the global economy is honoured at the expense of “the little people”. A particular means to economic prosperity is considered inviolable at the expense of other more participatory models. In our own country “Operation Sovereign Borders” declares Australian sovereignty inviolable over against the claims of non-Australians for protection. In other areas, governmental policy almost necessarily does not deal with the needs of particular person but has to pursue a one-size-fits-all approach within which never really fits, so that some get too much and others not enough. Political debates about “dole-bludgers”, disability pensions and who should pay what for aged care all reflect our struggle to reconcile the needs of the whole with the needs of individuals. More personally, when we prefer our soft-focussed memories of the way things once were over against the hard-edged realities of how they are now, we are in the realm of the general and the particular, our simple memories or dreams disabling us in our dealing with the complexity of what we actually have.

The gods – the many lords and gods of which Paul speaks – are active in the interplay between the all and the little things. And they are everywhere. We can say, then, that while Christian faith is indeed an option we have – to take up or not to take up – it is not an optional *extra*. For we are all, Christian or not, operating with one or several of Paul’s “many lords and many gods”. We are all existing as individuals within great powers which variously lift us up or threaten to crush us.

The question is, simply, how most adequately to speak the truth about the nature of our world. “Truth”, in our modern usage, is rather a bland word. It is, in fact, largely a negative word, in that its basic meaning is “not false.” Perhaps more importantly, it is a very “theoretical” word we associate with mere facts and figures. The Greek word we usually translate as truth in the New Testament is also a negative word, but in a

very different way. The word is *alētheia*. The negative bit is the first “a”: truth is “not –*letheia*”. The interesting thing is that *-letheia* is nothing like our “false”. The root word here has to do with “oblivion”. Truth is that which is “not oblivion”, not forgottenness. Perhaps more evocatively, the Greek root *lethe* is what gives us our English words *lethal* and *lethargy*. Truth is, biblically, that which is not lethal, not lethargic, does not crush into oblivion but rather brings life, vitality, restores what might otherwise have been forgotten.

The Creed concerns itself with the relationship between ever-changing, ever-decaying, ever-being-forgotten particulars of history – us ourselves – and the constancies to which we are ever-appealing for salvation or preservation in those movements. Do those constancies uphold, value, keep what is changing? The Creed declares that even if the things of the world are reduced to nothing – even by death on a cross – they still do not fall outside the faithful, loving embrace of God. And so everything finally matters, even if *we* cannot do anything about it.

The Creed is the shape it is because of the conviction that the Word has indeed become flesh, the whole has entered into the broken. And because it was the Word which was God which became flesh, it has become for us truth and glory or, to put it more clearly: life and wholeness. This is what we claim for ourselves and declare to each other when we say the Creed. This is the wood which those sometimes troubling trees build up for us. Let us, then, not be timid as we speak God’s promised new world in such confession. We, with the rest of this broken world, need to hear such a reconciling story.

Amen.

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