

1. “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty”

The Church is keeping a Year of Faith, an opportunity for all of us to renew our Faith, our Christian believing in the hope that we may be better able to not only understand our faith, but also bring others to the ‘door of faith’ and may be discover the faith anew. This aim is in keeping with the new evangelisation, whereby the Bishops of the Church fully realise that in order to proclaim the Gospel afresh in our own time, the Church must first rekindle that faith and even teach again, more diligently all the faithful – especially when we see many falling away and their faith crumbling!

Of the Year of Faith, Benedict XVI, the pope emeritus, wrote in ‘Porta Fidei’ ‘we want to arouse in every believer the aspiration to profess the faith in fullness and with renewed conviction, with confidence and hope and so rediscover the riches to which the door of faith has granted us entry.’

Central to our professing the Faith, saying what we believe must, of course, be the Creed or creeds. A name coming from the Latin, ‘Credo’ – I believe. From Apostolic times the Church expressed and handed on her faith in a collection of brief formulae, a synthesis of the faith, intended especially to be used at Baptism, a collection of doctrinal statements that basically say what the Christian faith is, “encompassing”, says St. Cyril of Jerusalem, “the whole knowledge of the true religion contained in the Old and New Testaments” – no longer a work in progress, but set in definitive terms, for all time by the Fathers of the Church – the case of the Nicene Creed, at the first two ecumenical Councils at Nicea and Constantinople, so as to protect believers from heresy, wrong believing and from making a faith of their own choosing. The creeds give us a common language to describe our Faith and so unite us all in the same confession of Faith.

Of course when talking about God we are in some senses describing the indescribable, we are dealing with mysteries beyond the every day – even though God has revealed himself to man, He remains a mystery beyond words, as St. Augustine of Hippo put it “If you understood him, he would not be God”. Yet the creeds of the Church do their best to describe what we believe and share together of our knowledge of God, what he has revealed of Himself and what in our believing makes us his pilgrim people here on earth.

Over the coming weeks, and indeed months, I shall be looking at the various statements which make up the Nicene Creed we say Sunday by Sunday not so much to tell you anything new or different, but just to give us the opportunity to think about what we are saying and more importantly what it is we say we are believing! And so ‘We believe in One God, the Father Almighty’. Belief in God is the first affirmation in the Creed and also the most fundamental. The whole of both the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed speak of God and when it speaks of man and the world it does so only in relation to God. All the other articles or statements in the Creed depend on the first – the other articles just ‘help us’, says the Catechism, ‘to know God better as he revealed himself progressively to men.’ ‘The confession of his *oneness*’ says the Catechism, ‘is inseparable from the profession of God’s existence and is equally fundamental. God is unique; there is only one God. A God who is one in nature, substance and essence.’

“We believe in One God” the confession of God’s oneness with which the Nicene Creed begins, has its roots, of course, in the divine revelation found in the Old Testament. It was to Israel, his chosen people, that God revealed himself as the only God. ‘Hear O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.’ (*Deuteronomy 6: 4-5*). Through the prophets, God calls Israel, and ultimately all nations to turn to Him, the one and only God. ‘Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God and there is no other... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue confess.’ Jesus affirms that God is the one Lord, who you must love with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’ – this was the first commandment God revealed to Moses.

[At the same time as confessing we believe in one God, the Church also confesses that this Jesus is Lord and we believe too in the Holy Spirit as ‘the Lord and giver of life’. As the Fathers of the Church put it (*Lateran council*), ‘We believe that there is only one true God, eternal, infinite and unchangeable, incomprehensible, almighty and ineffable’, yet a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons indeed, but one essence, substance or nature.]

For Israel and for the Church came the realisation that God is unique – there is no other like him, he revealed this by making known his divine name – telling someone your name is

how you make yourself known to others! God's revelation was a gradual process, but it was the revelation of the divine name to Moses in the theophany of the burning bush on the threshold of the Exodus and of the covenant at Sinai that proved fundamental for Israel and for the Christian Church.

"I am who I am" – the name that reveals the truth that God alone is. 'There is no other God beside him!' As the catechism puts it "God the fullness of being and of every perfection, without origin, without end. All creatures receive all that they are and have from Him; He alone is his very being and He is of Himself everything that He is." A God who transcends the world and history – all his works may perish, 'wear out like a garment', but "you God", says the psalmist "you are the same and your years have no end". (*Ps 102*) In God there is 'no variation or shadow due to change' (*James 1: 17*)

God is 'He who is' from everlasting to everlasting and as such remains faithful to Himself and to His promises, He is abounding in steadfastness and faithfulness.

God may seem a bit distant and a mystery to us but above all, He who is, is, something we all understand, Love! As St. John affirms in his first epistle, 'God is Love.' The catechism says this is 'his innermost secret', God himself being an 'eternal exchange of love. Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an exchange he has destined us to share in! Love is not mentioned by name in the Creed but it is implicit when we call him Father! Language that not only describes him as the first origin of everything, but that He is also goodness and love, says the catechism, mother too, for God transcends the human distinction between sexes – the language of faith describing the intimacy between creator and creature, calling on our human experience of parenthood. Though Love is fundamental to our faith in and understanding of God, It is only his omnipotence, his almightiness that is named in the Creed, an almightiness that has a great bearing on our lives and the lives of the world. The God who created everything also rules over everything and can do everything. But we know too that power is always ruled and governed by love, which is why always we call him Father as well as Almighty!

Fatherhood, almightiness, and the way we profess our faith in God very much derives from what is our own human experience. Fatherhood is something we understand from what is primarily a human relationship, and although none of us would claim to be almighty – doesn't our primary understanding of might and power come from thoughts of our own society and world? In other words our understanding of God as expressed in the creed is formed in anthropomorphic terms. Of course for those outside the community of faith it might seem as if Christian orthodoxy thinks of God simply as a human person imagined on a much vaster scale. Yet no magnifying of human Fatherhood, power or creativity could give true meaning to 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.' "Such a magnification" says Prof. Quick (a former Oxford regius professor of divinity) in his book *Doctrines of the Creed*, "could only give us a conception of a superman – a superman who would still not be God". 'In the beginning was God' the bible says, ultimately any idea we have of God somehow comes not from us, but from God – it is he who gives us understanding, through revelation.

Voltaire wrote that 'God made man in his own image: man has retaliated' an irony indicating the truth to which our anthropomorphism really points "for" says Professor Quick "in making a God in our own image we are only retaliating, responding to God with whom the initiative lies" – in other words God himself has given us the capacity to know him. Our understanding of him is limited by our human nature, and we know our limits, this points us towards believing in a God who knows no limits – in man... fatherhood, power, creatorship are but "dim hints and reflections", says Quick, "of the one perfect being from whom humanity itself proceeds and towards whom humanity proceeds, towards whom it aspires and before whom it bows its head in worship"; and so Quick concludes "our anthropomorphism", (talking about God in human terms) "is not how we measure or judge the divine- but human fatherhood, power and creatorship do point us beyond themselves to an author and a power from whom they come and in whom their truest meaning is found." fine words from the days when Anglicanism had some outstanding theologians!

John Maquarrie, another well-regarded Anglican theologian, and a more recent regius professor, takes up the discussion of how we talk of God. In the creed by talking of God's incomprehensibility as it is stated in that other Creed, the Athanasian creed – that God is incomprehensible doesn't mean God is just an empty name – our use of personal language is symbolic talking about the mystery of God, the God who is at the same time both transcendent, (out there) and immanent (right here), hidden and manifest – the highest attributes that we talk of in human, personal terms – fall short, yet, he concludes they in so far as they make God unhidden, they are true.

We might think we understand what we mean when we call God, Father, but what of His almightiness? We said earlier that it is related to our understanding of his Fatherhood but just how powerful does that make him? What do we mean when we say God can do all things -certainly mediaeval theologians such as St.Thomas Aquinas grappled with this one. In discussing God's omnipotence, he concludes that there are certain things He can't do because they involve self-contradiction. You can't have a square circle for example! He will only do what is intrinsically possible. However as Professor Quick says, "Who is to judge what is or isn't possible for God ?" – rather he says "the value of the doctrine lies, not in maintaining the sense that God can do everything but rather it assures us that certain things for God are possible and this means our belief' in the salvation of men and the final victory over evil are not just idle dreams."

This omnipotence of God has always been an important discussion, some theologians have says Macquarrie, so emphasised it as 'to make God look like a capricious despot' – he takes up some words of St. Anselm, which basically state that we should not view this omnipotence 'in any way that might impugn his dignity'. In other words the omnipotence or almightiness of God does not mean an irrational force that might break out in any direction, but a power that is ordered and which can not therefore do some things without disrupting itself – there is a kind of self imposed limit especially if we think how, if we are created in his image, there are things like love, freedom and responsibility.

God is almighty in the sense that he has the power to work towards and achieve his purpose and when we speak of him being all powerful – omnipotent – we do so believing that he can make all things serve his will. He is not limited by anything and yet this power is not just sheer force which nothing can resist and does as He wishes –rather it is power that is in control and able to 'subdue all things to itself' and directed by a will that must always be creative, not destructive, always making something rather than nothing of the world, almighty in that he is the source and also the horizon of all possibilities. A power always tempered by love, but if that's the case, then 'Why?' non-believers often ask, is the world like it is? This is, however to simply reduce love to an emotion and power to the use of force, but then isn't that how God seems to come over in the Old Testament, where love seems to be withdrawn when it doesn't work and harsher methods are employed – like the school master who keeps the cane in the cupboard to use as a last resort! However the Christian Faith, based on Revelation doesn't quite see it like that for we believe God's almightiness is always founded on his love – a love that never employs force to fulfill its purposes, quite the contrary. It was St. Paul who spoke of the Cross as the power and wisdom of God and if that be the case then his power is not some terrific cataclysmic happening, forcing us to obedience or wiping us out, rather God's omnipotence is shown in the complete self-sacrifice of Christ – here is a power that converts 'even suffering itself into something active and creative and makes evil itself sub-serve the purpose of Good. For Prof. Quick "the omnipotence of God is not demonstrable by any logic" because, he says, "the power of love can only be apprehended by those within whom it already dwells". Those who have not entered the door of faith will not yet know this but for believers, those inside the community of faith, 'the cross will always', as St Paul tells us, 'be a sign of God's power at work in the world-a power that the unbeliever may view as God's weakness or at best his foolishness'.

Next time..."Maker of Heaven and Earth"