

Have you ever listened to a preacher and thought – they need a good slap?

Well St Nicholas allegedly did – the same St Nicholas by the way who gets a lot of attention in December along with his reindeer.

The year was 325AD and the place was the imperial palace of the Roman emperor Constantine in Nicaea – in modern day Turkey.

A year earlier, Constantine had reunited the Empire with an army of Christian soldiers and had been slowly starting to find faith for himself. He saw in Christianity a religion that could unite his fractious, warring empire – if only he could get the Christians to agree amongst themselves – which if you've ever been to a church meeting.....

Nevertheless Constantine was a stubborn and determined man, nicknamed Bull Neck, one whose family had risen from humble beginnings and quite ruthlessly fought, married, murdered and divorced their way up through the Roman army and society, until his own soldiers demanded he become Caesar – which happened in York by the way, so we can blame the stubbornness of Yorkshire people for all of this.

Constantine decided to gather together over 300 Bishops and another 1000 or so priests and deacons from across the Empire and beyond and get them to sort out their differences. There were some administrative matters, like which calendar to use to set the date of Easter, and some other rules were established –the very first rule was that clergy were banned from castrating themselves – because that was an urgent thing apparently - but mostly they were there to agree on the first official Creed and to finally decide what exactly they meant when they worshipped Jesus as God.

On one side there was Arius, a priest from Egypt, and on the other there was his boss, Archbishop Alexander. Both had many supporters, but Arius, a tall charismatic man who spoke quietly but persuasively, was thought of as a great pastor and was a celebrity star of his generation, had won over many people to his way of thinking.

Arius believed very passionately that there was only one true God – the Father. As God he could not change, or suffer, or die. So he could not be overcome, and Christians could have confidence in him whatever they were going through. And Christians had been through a lot. Christianity had only been legal for 12 years by the time of the Council of Nicea was called, and many Christians had been tortured, killed or imprisoned in Arius' lifetime and in the generations before. It mattered to him deeply, therefore, that God was eternal and unchanging and dependable.

It also mattered to him, surrounded by the many gods of the Roman Empire, including all the past Emperors who were worshipped as gods, to protect the idea of *one* God, the Father, and not to confuse this issue by appearing to have any more Gods than that.

So what did that mean for Jesus? Well, Arius argued that The Son was the first thing that God created, and that God gave Jesus his divine power and nature and sent him into the world. But Jesus was not God for Arius in the same way that the Father is. Jesus is the 'supreme creature', the first and most perfect and eternal creation of God – a God-like man. A divine and holy man. But not a God, just the Son of God.

Archbishop Alexander, meanwhile, argued that The Son was God in the same way that The Father was God. Both had always existed and had always been One with each other. God had not at some time been divided into Father and Son, and God had not created another mini-god at some time either. Rather God had always been The Father and The Son and The Holy Spirit and that, in Jesus, the eternal God the Son came into the world to save us.

You could be forgiven perhaps for wondering why this matters. The differences between them are very fine points of philosophical detail you might think.

It is likely that the Emperor Constantine was frustrated by it too. While he was becoming famous for his enthusiasm for spirituality, he was not famous for his knowledge about it. He wasn't a subtle man, and listening to a thousand theologians debating for the two long months the Council lasted, picking over the distinctions between 'begotten' and 'eternally begotten', 'of one substance' versus 'like substance' – all going on in Greek which was not his first, or even second language – probably exasperated him.

So in the middle of the debate, when legend has it that St Nick lost his temper and got up grabbed Arius by the beard and slapped him in the face, he was probably finally speaking Constantine's language. Nevertheless the Emperor had to have him imprisoned for a short while before allowing him out again, whereupon legend then has it that the Saint spent most of the rest of the Council sleeping in his chair, which got him in more trouble.

Eventually, more through debate than slapping people, thankfully, all but two of the Bishops were able to agree to the text that forms the basis of the Nicene Creed that we commonly still use in services today – not that Christians stopped arguing – the creed was extended in 381AD to say more about the Holy Spirit, and debates about how Jesus could be both God and man carried on into the next Century and beyond.

But in the end it seems that quite a simple argument won the day. If God is the Father and God cannot change, God must always have been the Father and so the Son must always have been the Son.

If there was a time when there was no Son, then God was not the Father then. So God must have changed. So Arius, your God is changeable and therefore can be changed and defeated in the future. A theological slap Arius couldn't recover from.

Why, Constantine probably wondered, couldn't you lot have just said that two months ago so I could have got back to Emperor stuff like swanking around in lots of jewels and having my family members bumped off?

But out of those debates came a gift to the Church – an outline of the central beliefs of our faith that has, even since, guided our thought, our worship and our prayer. Over the next few weeks, in a series of sermons written by different members of the team, but all preached in unity, we will look in more detail at what it says and what that means for us. But for today, here is an overview of what it says and why it matters, and then finally, why it matters that we have a creed at all.

Firstly the creed affirms that everything that exists, comes from God. This is important as it means there is nothing beyond God's control and nothing in the world that does not ultimately come from God. There are no rival powers to worry about, no other equal and opposing forces of evil that can overcome him. All that is, is part of his plan.

Secondly, it affirms that everything that God is, Jesus is too. It was really, truly and fully God who was born one of us, who suffered and died with us, and rose again to save us. Only God can do this with any certainty, because only God, who is eternal, can give his eternity to his creatures. He became what we are so we could become what he is.

Because he is eternal, he can give eternal life to us. When we suffer and die, we know that God has suffered and died with us. But because he is God, he cannot be overcome by it and death cannot hold us as it could not hold him.

Thirdly, it affirms that the Holy Spirit is One with the Father and the Son – they are all the same substance, the same Love, coming from eternity, and breaking into the now and being with us.

As a result there is one act of God, and one revelation from creation, through the prophets, through Jesus, through the unity of one Church, through the Spirit in our lives today – and so we are called to be One, sharing the sure hope of one world to come.

The creed was born in argument and hostility but what it offers is an important guideline for unity, which we might do well to remember as the Church continues to have debates locally and nationally and internationally as it always has done.

The Nicene Creed is the *most* you can be asked to believe.

The *least* you can be asked to believe is the baptismal creed – in which we simply say that we believe in God the Father the Creator of all, in God the Son, the Saviour of the world, and in the Holy Spirit the Lord the Giver of Life.

If you believe in the baptismal creed you can be baptised and are fully a member of the Church.

If you want to go deeper, the Nicene Creed is the most anyone can ask you to say you believe. The Church in Wales calls it the ‘sufficient statement of our faith’

.
Everything outside of it is a matter that we can debate and have different opinions on and still be true to the one faith, still be one family and one Church.

The Church in Wales is a broad church and many very different expressions of faith are welcome within it. But in the end we need to have some sort of faith in common, something that holds us together, and that space between the simple statements of the baptismal creed and the more developed theology of the Nicene Creed is the space in which we keep the faith. So over these next few weeks, let us reflect on what it has to say to us – and hopefully we don’t have to slap any preachers to get to the truth of it.

Amen.