

A Meditation on the Part Played by the Nicene Creed In Episcopalian Worship

Fr. Dr. Jon Goman

June 26, 2006

Proper 28A, Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29

Before I tackle the Nicene Creed in our continuing series of sermons on the different parts of the Eucharist, a few words on today's gospel. Gospel and creed aren't unrelated, although connecting them is a bit of a stretch.

In what kind of society does this story take place? A society of rural peasants, farmers making enough to survive from year to year but never with much extra. In such societies there was what might be called "an assumption of limited goods." There is never enough to go around; never enough to make everyone secure. Everyone in the society knows it. If you have a lot more than somebody else, you aren't taking others' needs into account and the assumption is that you acquired your wealth unjustly. So people who were rich were envied, and yet everyone knew they got rich by squeezing someone. The assumption that one cannot be both rich and just is very common in peasant societies. That doesn't mean people didn't want to be rich. Now maybe I'm a peasant, because to me this analysis sounds pretty realistic. These ancient people knew that if somebody is rich, their richness made someone else poor.

Therefore this land owner begins to smell a bit unsavory even before the story starts. He's fabulously rich, which implies injustice and he's about to become absentee to boot. In addition, charging money at interest, which is what the landlord told the third servant to do, is against the Old Testament law. You don't do that, you don't charge interest. Maybe you can justify charging interest on loans to people who aren't your coreligionists, but you certainly can't charge other Jews.

So the landlord, who is, by the way, in many interpretations understood to be God, is a shady character who has no compunction about skirting close to disobedience to the law. Villains quite regularly become central figures in Jesus's stories.

You need to know that the third servant is obeying the letter of the rabbinic law about how one responsibly handles goods left in trust. If you take someone's property in trust and hide it by burying it in the ground and if it is then lost you cannot be held responsible. You took proper and prudent steps to preserve the property left in trust with you. You have acted as prudently as anyone could act and, therefore, you cannot be held responsible for the loss.

Not only is the landlord operating on the boundaries of the legal – and in our age we understand the boundaries of the legal – but he cares little for the moral patterns and textures of his own age.

Comment: Is the other servant speculating, then? Wouldn't that be illegal?

O yes. These people aren't very nice. You need to know that to understand what the first century reaction to this story would be. The audience might be rather horrified by it, and yet, because in that society, also, wealth was respected, you could admire it even while you despised how it was acquired. So there is tension here, an attraction/repulsion is going on. This landlord is rich and, therefore, admired and feared, but he would also be despised as morally unattractive and as playing fast and loose with the rules. Well, that's why we watch gangster movies. The people in them are rich and playing fast and loose with the rules and we both admire and condemn them.

So what kind of conclusion does Jesus draw from this? Two things, I think. First, we are judged on the basis of what we do with what we are given. Second, I believe, although I can't prove, that he intends to apply this idea to a lot more than money. In other words, it's not how much ability you start out with which determines your success with God. People start out with all sorts of different levels of resource: ten, five and one. But to use what one has been given takes courage and risk. Our openness to God depends on our exercising that courage and taking those risks. There is no openness to the newness of the Kingdom which comes from subjecting our lives to the stasis of burial.

What in heaven's name does this have to do with the use of the creed in Eucharistic liturgy? What follows is a forced interpretation, but at least there are connections. It goes something like this:

The function of the creed is one of the most misunderstood aspects of the Eucharistic liturgy. I frequently encounter people who think the creed important because it has some kind of positive content to it to which we must accede. "We believe in one God the Father, the Almighty..." that means, to these people, that there is some definite set of ideas about God which all Christians must believe. If they don't or can't believe some of what they think the creed means, what they were (horrors) taught in Sunday School the creed means, then their Christianity is defective.

Yet if you study the history of Christian theology you discover this immense, unending evolution, a constantly changing understanding of the what the words in the creed mean. The human understanding of these words and ideas is not immune to change and reassessment. The idea of God which is held today, whatever it is for you, and it varies a lot, is not, I can guarantee you, the same idea of God held by people in the first century. It's not the same idea of God held by the people who wrote the creed. But if we're not believing the same things as those who wrote the creed, then the question legitimately comes, what good is the creed and why is it there?

To illustrate my point, that we don't necessarily believe the same things about the parts of the creed as the people who wrote it, consider the idea of God. Most of you, were I to be so unpastoral as to engage you in a conversation about your ideas concerning God, which would be a rather frightening experience,

would assert God to be an immaterial but nevertheless real being. But a good second century Christian would not have believed that, he or she would have believed God to be a material being, like everything else in the universe. In other words they were, in the philosophical sense of the word, materialists, even about God. Now that may seem a bit on the odd side, but it's not until the 4th century, until the junction of Augustinian thinking and Platonism, that we get the notion of an immaterial god as the dominant conception of God in western Christianity. So even our understanding of the right way to think about God changes. When we say, in the creed, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty. . ." the history of Christian thought gives considerable latitude as to just what, in detail, we're thinking about if we're thinking about one God, the Father, the Almighty.

Consequently, to say that there is some definite set of theological ideas I have to believe when I say the creed really amounts to saying, and I hope I can get this out with a straight face, that we believe whatever ideas about God are dominant in the community of which we happen to be a part. Somehow, I don't think that the intent of the creed is to turn us into theological parrots. When you stop to think about it, it is ridiculous. Yet my bet would be that the majority of Christians who say the creed every Sunday fall into the trap of thinking that there is a set of ideas they have to believe if they are to say the creed with integrity.

I could take every major idea and historical claim presented in the creed and show how the meanings of concepts have shifted, how the understanding of historical "facts" has changed during the last two thousand years. There is little hard and fast content; the whole thing is like a kaleidoscope. You remember those toys we had when we were kids in which tumbling pieces of colored glass made fascinating designs? The history of Christian thought and therefore the history of the ideas we assert we believe when we recite the creed is like that kaleidoscopic pattern. It's constantly moving. Now people like me think that such shifting patterns present both truth and beauty, so we become fascinated with tracing the history. In the movements of doctrinal understanding are presented different facets of the truth of God. Then, because we are fascinated by that we fall into the trap of thinking we would be good clergy. Then we are ordained and discover that other people don't agree with that idea that being fascinated by the patterns enough to stake your life upon them is enough. Some people want to know what they ought to believe right here, right now, definitely, thank you and no room for movement, if you please.

An examination of how Anglican thinkers have understood the creeds shows up something interesting. From the book *Doctrine in the Church of England*, an attempt to summarize the differing positions held by Anglican theologians between World Wars I and II we find the following statement about creeds.

These formularies should not be held to prejudge questions which have arisen since their formulation or problems which have been modified by fresh knowledge or fresh conceptions.

Nevertheless, if an Anglican theologian thinks a particular formulary

not wholly adequate, he has a special obligation to preserve whatever truth that formulary was trying to secure, and to see to it that any statement he puts forward as more adequate does in fact secure this.

Doctrine in the Church of England, p. 37

This idea of the flexibility of the creeds is not just my idea, but an idea widely spread among Anglican theologians. The above quote addresses not the fixity of the creeds, but how to give them a responsible flexibility. To name just one figure from the past of the Anglican Church who agrees with this position on creeds, archbishop William Temple. We know that what the church believes will, of necessity, evolve. There is another reason why the creed can't tell us what to believe. The God we believe in is beyond definition in terms of a list of philosophical notions and/or a narrative of historical events. Since the creed is a list of such notions and of historical actions, we cannot say that the creed is primarily a box within which we think, even though the temptation is to treat it that way.

What creeds really are, is an attempt to crystallize the evolving and changing patterns of theological thought at a particular time into a nice handy summary theological form. The value of such an exercise is that it gives one a place from which to begin. Begin from a summary of what some people who really thought about the issues thought at a particular place and time.

Think about the use of the Nicene Creed in our liturgy. First, we read scripture, then, in theory, it's explained a bit in the sermon. The creed follows. Now the early church understood the creed primarily as a summary of the teaching of scripture, not as a set of doctrines which must be believed. The one can lead to the other, but they are not the same. So we read scripture and then, as now, scripture was sometimes experienced as quite unedifying. And yet, taken all together, after years of acquaintance, I'd have to say that its impact is immense. But how do I take that rather large body of material which is scripture and condense it into its essential bones, into a few notions which must be considered, thought about, and, as this morning's collect said, digested, internalized into our selves? What are the basic ideas in scripture one must deal with? And that's what the creed tells us: here's where we start. If you are a member of this Christian community, these ideas are the tools in your kit. You can build lots of different things with them, but these are the tools you begin with. You are even free to disagree with the language of the Nicene Creed and you can still be a Christian. But you have to disagree within the framework of the tradition. That means, you start with the creedal idea, you look around you, think about it, look at experience, consider your evidence, and then say, I don't agree with this for thus and so reasons. Instead this seems a better idea. But what is built is built, whether in agreement or by modification, on a foundation of the creedal understanding of scripture.

What you can't do and be a Christian is start from somewhere else. You can't start, for instance, with the Bagavad-gita. You may go to it in the process of your exploration, but you can't begin there. The Bagavad-gita has a lot of wisdom in it, it's worth a read. In fact, it's worth more than one. But, you've

got to start with the ideas in the creed and bring them to the Gita. You can't start with the Gita and bring the ideas of the creed to it, it has to be the other way around if you are to be a Christian exploring Hinduism and not a Hindu exploring Christianity.

So the creed is almost a technical thing, as a text or rule book is a technical thing. The creed gives one the basic tools necessary to go about theologizing, to get on with thinking out your faith. And, consequently, there's a great deal of freedom in the creed. The unity of the Christian community depends on our starting from the same place, and that's Jesus, and on the fact, pointed to in today's lessons, that we are all going to the same place, which has a lot of metaphoric names, but which we'll call the Kingdom of God. On the journey, the road is rather wide and there may be more than one path from here to there. Last night, when coming back from diocesan convention, there was a big wreck on I-5, and I was caught in the resulting traffic jam. From Eugene north traffic was moving about 3 miles an hour. I thought, "What am I doing here? There's the Coberg exit coming up." So I took the exit and went the back roads. Eventually I arrived at Peoria Road and Highway 34. But it was a different kind of journey than I would have had on the main road. Now sometimes in peoples' lives things happen which force them off the main road of Christianity. That doesn't mean those side roads don't work. They start from the same place and may, eventually, arrive at the same end. It would have been easier and faster, under normal conditions, to stay on I-5. But conditions weren't normal. What's true of highways is sometimes true of life.

What the creed does is give us the beginning and the end. It doesn't give us the pattern of the journey. That's where a lot of people make mistakes about the use of the creed, they believe it gives the pattern of the journey. But it's a far more trusting document than that. It trusts people to use its ideas responsibly, to use the summary of what it means to be a Christian responsibly, to try to work one's life out in those terms. But that doesn't mean you have to stay on the main highway to do it. I don't recommend getting off the main drag unless you have a good reason. But such reasons exist.

So that's a bit about how to understand and use creeds. Now, one more thing. Some of you are fairly astute theologically, in fact, all of you are, so you'll notice that I've ducked the question of what it means to say, "We believe in . . ." If the creed is supposed to give us the beginning and the end, what are they? Let me try to answer that.

Believing is a process. What that means . . . , well, let me put it this way. Even though one member of my family is a young adult and two members of my family are teenagers, I believe in them. What does that mean? I have no idea what my oldest son is doing right now and have no idea what he's been up to for the past two or three months. I trust he's been going to school, but couldn't prove it, since he's back at Macalester in the Twin Cities of Minnesota and I'm out here. Now it's not just that I trust him to do the things I think it would be wise for him to do. I know better than that. Real trust is far deeper than that. I trust him to be striving to go in a right direction. He may be mistaken about how he goes there, as we all are mistaken, now and again. But

I'm convinced he believes in the worth, not only of his own journey, but also of everyone else's. To say, "We believe in God . . ." is to say that I am open to moving in relation to this idea of God. To believe in the people in one's family means to be open to being told by them who they are. To believe in God means to be open to that relationship in which God tells you who God is. To have a definite idea of who God is and be unwilling to change, that is not faith, but its opposite. In the same way, in work situations, I have sometimes had a rector come to me and say, "I believe in you, here's what you are going to do." I look at the job description and say "This doesn't appear to be me at all. Can we talk about this?" The response, sometimes, has been, "Do it." That's not faith, but its opposite, because faith lives as a dialogue in which one is open to discovery of who the other, who comes to you, really is. So faith, at its core, always has a sense of ignorance, a sense of the not knowing, a sense of uncertainty, and, therefore, a kind of anxiety. Yet at the same time faith is the farthest thing in the world from despair. Real despair says that nothing ever really comes to us from the other, from the emptiness, from the outside. Faith is that awareness that things are always coming to us from the outside, that God will not abandon us. That doesn't mean that God will give us what we think we want or need. Sometimes I don't get what I think I need – or actually do need — from my family. But faith is not determined by gifts exchanged, but foundations and goals shared. What faith does mean is that God is always coming to us, we always have that opportunity to be discovering a little bit more what it means to be saying, "We believe in God. . ."

To have this kind of faith, to be constantly open to that which comes to us out of the void, that which comes to us on behalf of life, which creates life outside of ourselves, that's no small thing. To live according to that receptivity is a hard way to live. But it's a lot better than the tempting alternative of putting ourselves in a box in which we know everything, including that God is in that very same box whose boundaries and contents we have defined, and not even God can get out of it.

So, that's a little bit about how I think the Nicene Creed ought to be understood and a little about how it functions in liturgy. Because, and this is my last point, what's going to happen later in the liturgy is that God will come to us from the outside. He comes under the physical forms of bread and wine, and to receive him properly we have to know that we don't fully know who he is. So the creed, which reminds us that we have a framework of ideas from which to begin, but not to pin us down, points directly to what is going to happen later in the Eucharist when, in order for this funny little gesture of a symbolic meal to have any meaning, we have to be open to God coming from outside. There has to be that openness to the Other speaking to us and not just a circular voice going around and around in our own heads.

Please stand for the creed.