



First Sunday of Lent February 26, 2012 B

The Apostles Creed — A Commentary

Down through the centuries, creeds are generally formulated for two reasons:

- To oppose or debunk existing belief errors about Christianity,
- To state succinctly what Catholic Christians believe.

The *Nicene Creed* evolved in the fourth century to affirm the humanity and divinity of Christ. The Council of Trent developed a creed to deal with the challenges of the Protestant Reformation. Legend has it that the Apostles wrote the Apostles' Creed on the tenth day after Jesus' Ascension into heaven. While no one believes this to be true, the name of the creed stuck. The *Apostles' Creed* was drawn up in the early centuries of Christianity and each of the statements in the Creed can be traced back to beliefs current in the Apostolic period.

It is believed that the Apostles' Creed was written to oppose the heretical teachings of *Gnosticism* and other heresies prevalent in the early church. Gnosticism is a doctrine of salvation based on having the right knowledge, often a secret knowledge known only to the initiates. True Christianity is based on a relationship with Christ and is open to all—in fact, believers are *not* to keep it a secret! The following commentary on the Creed was written by James Kiefer:

- * I believe in God the Father Almighty,
- * Maker of Heaven and Earth,

The Gnostics held that the physical universe is evil and that God did not make it.

- * And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord,
- * Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
- * Born of the Virgin Mary,

The Gnostics agreed that the orthodox Christians were wrong in supposing that God had taken human nature or a human body. Some of them distinguished between Christ, whom they acknowledged to be in some sense divine, and the man Jesus, who was at most an instrument through whom the Christ spoke. They held that the man Jesus did not become the bearer or instrument of the Christ until the Spirit descended upon him at his baptism, and that the Spirit left him before the

crucifixion, so that the Spirit had only a brief and tenuous association with matter and humanity. Others affirmed that there was never a man Jesus at all, but only the appearance of a man, through which appearance wise teachings were given to the first disciples. Against this the orthodox Christians affirmed that Jesus was conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit (thus denying the Gnostic position that the Spirit had nothing to do with Jesus until his Baptism), that he was born (which meant that he had a real physical body, and not just an appearance) of a virgin (which implied that he had been special from the first moment of his life, and not just from the baptism on).

- * Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

There were many stories then current about gods who died and were resurrected, but they were offered quite frankly as myths, as non-historical stories symbolic of the renewal of the vegetation every spring after the seeming death of winter. If you asked, "When did Adonis die, you would be told either, "Long ago and far away," or else, "His death is not an event in earthly time." Jesus, on the other hand, died at a particular time and place in history, under the jurisdiction of Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea from 26 to 36 CE, or during the last ten years of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius.

- * Was crucified, died, and buried; he descended into Hades.

Here the creed hammers home the point that he was really dead. He was not an illusion. He was nailed to a post. He died. He had a real body, a corpse, that was placed in a tomb. He was not merely unconscious—his spirit left his body and went to the realm of the dead. It is a common belief among Christians that on this occasion he took the souls of those who had died trusting in the promises made under the Old Covenant—Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, and many others—and brought them out of the realm of the dead and into heavenly glory. But the creed is not concerned with this point. The reference to the descent into Hades (or Hell, or Sheol) is here to make it clear that the death of Jesus was not just a swoon or a coma, but death in every sense of the word.

- * The third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven,
- * And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
- * From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
- * I believe in the Holy Ghost,
- * The holy Catholic Church,

The Gnostics believed that the most important Christian doctrines were reserved for a select few. The orthodox belief was that the fullness of the Gospel was to be preached to the entire human race. Hence the term "catholic," or universal, which distinguished them from the Gnostics.

- * The communion of saints,
- * The forgiveness of sins,

The Gnostics considered that what men needed was not forgiveness, but enlightenment. Ignorance, not sin, was the problem. Some of them, believing the body to be a snare and delusion, led lives of great asceticism. Others, believing the body to be quite separate from the soul, held that it did not matter what the body did, since it was completely foul anyway, and its actions had no effect on the soul. They accordingly led lives that were not ascetic at all. Either way, the notion of forgiveness was alien to them.

- * The resurrection of the body,

The chief goal of the Gnostics was to become free forever from the taint of matter and the shackles of the body, and to return to the heavenly realm as Pure Spirit. They totally rejected any idea of the resurrection of the body.

- * And life everlasting. AMEN

'Descended into hell'

In a recent issue of the Florida Catholic, Msgr, Mannion responded to a question on the phrase "descended into hell" in the following way:

Throughout the history of Christianity we have understood hell as the place of the damned. However, before the time of Christ, hell meant both the abode of the damned and the place in which the righteous waited until they were redeemed by Christ's own death and resurrection. The Scriptures call the abode of the dead, into which Christ entered after his death, "hell"—Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek—for the reason that those who were there were deprived of the vision of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer" (CCC. No.

633). It continues: "It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham's bosom, whom Jesus delivered when he descended into hell. Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him" (Ibid.). Thus, the version of the Apostles' Creed we find in the new translation of the Mass is more in line with the Scriptures. But we have to be sure that we understand "hell" in that Creed as I have just explained it.

The gates of heaven were opened not by Christ's death alone, but by his death, resurrection and ascension. Heaven cannot exist without Christ; for heaven means the dwelling place of the resurrected Christ.

An "Ancient Homily for Holy Saturday" (printed in the Catechism in No. 635) speaks of Holy Saturday as the day in which Christ went into hell and sought out all the righteous, declaring salvation to them; among those sought out are Adam and Eve, to whom Christ was both God and son.

Lessons from Noah's Ark

- One:** Don't miss the boat.
- Two:** Remember that we are all in the same boat.
- Three:** Plan ahead. It wasn't raining when Noah built the Ark.
- Four:** Stay fit. When you are old, someone may ask you to do something really big.
- Five:** Don't listen to critics; just get on with the job that needs to be done.
- Six:** Build your future on high ground.
- Seven:** For safety's sake, travel in pairs.
- Eight:** Speed isn't always an advantage. The snails were on board with the cheetahs.
- Nine:** When you're stressed, float a while.
- Ten:** Remember, the Ark was built by amateurs, the Titanic by professionals.
- Eleven:** No matter the storm, when you are with God there's always a rainbow waiting.

Have a blessed week,

Le Saran