

# A Faith to Live By...

## Sermons on the Apostles' Creed

### 1. "I believe..."

Before we embark on our study of the first 'article' of the Apostles' Creed, it might be useful to say something about creeds in general, and this one in particular. What sort of thing is it that we are

looking at, and where did it come from? The short answer is The Scottish Prayer Book, but there's a lot longer and more interesting answer than that!

Like many English words (not least those having to do in one way or another with the life of the church), the word 'creed' owes its origin to another language – Latin. For many centuries Latin was the language that educated people used for formal communication (whatever part of the known world they were living in), and it was the language of the church's life and worship. In the Christian west, even the Bible was translated into Latin (the so-called 'Vulgate' edition, translated as early the fourth century CE by the theologian Jerome). In its original Latin form, the opening



words of the Apostles' Creed are '*Credo in Deum*' – 'I believe in God' – and it is from that first word 'Credo' that our English 'creed' comes. Creeds, then, are statements of what is believed by Christians, though they come in different shapes and sizes, and were written for a variety of different purposes which affect their content. Some of them were written in order to clarify and state the church's official understanding when some maverick or 'heretical' view was being circulated unhelpfully in its ranks. That's the case with

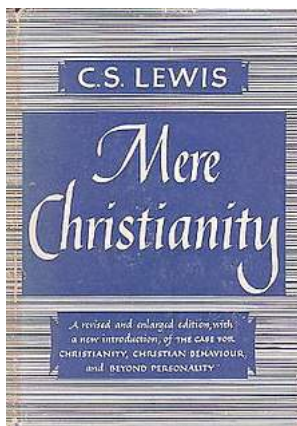
the creed we use most Sunday mornings in the Eucharistic liturgy – the so-called



Nicene Creed. It was written and adopted by Church Councils in 325CE and 381CE in order to clarify and restate the church's traditional understanding of the incarnation; namely, that Jesus was and is the Son of God, God himself who has come into the world to redeem us. That particular focus skews the content of the creed, and makes it both a bit unbalanced in coverage, and frankly a bit technical in its terminology for most Christians' regular purposes. What it seeks to do is to clarify the meaning of biblical teaching about Jesus, but in order to exclude misunderstanding its authors were compelled to borrow words and ideas of a philosophical rather than a biblical sort, and that makes it a bit indigestible for many of us much of the time.



The Apostles' Creed is rather different. Its purpose was *not* to respond to deviant ideas with intellectually rigorous restatements of particular beliefs, but rather to provide an overview of what C. S. Lewis calls 'mere Christianity', i.e. the basic collection of things which being a Christian involves someone in believing, and which have been and are held to be true by most Christians most of the time, and by the church officially everywhere and all the time. There are lots of things about which Christians disagree, and those disagreements have sometimes led to divisions and the forming of different



Christian 'denominations'. But there are other things, more central to the stuff of what it means to be a Christian at all, and the Apostles' Creed is a digest of what might reasonably be reckoned to be the 'bare minimum' of those. So, it certainly isn't intended to be exhaustive! But it is reasonably comprehensive in its coverage. It's a short, relatively easily memorised answer to the question 'So, what is it that Christians believe?', and it is identifiably based on the teaching of Scripture. Its language is clear, and it follows a narrative pattern, telling the same story that Scripture tells about God's dealings with the world in Jesus, but crunching it down to a 'bullet-point' format. It would make a good series of Power-

point slides. Or ... maybe not! Its brevity and clarity, though, make it far more useful



than some of the other creeds, and it's a pity that the predominance of Eucharistic worship in the contemporary church means that it

is now rarely used. (It is used weekly at Evensong, which is another good reason for attending that service!)

So, where did it come from? Well, despite its name, it didn't come from the apostles! There are, to be sure, 'credal' bits and pieces in the New Testament, such as the fragment from Philippians 2 that we sometimes use on a Sunday morning ('Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, ... emptied himself, ... being born in human likeness' etc.). And these, too, seem to have been easily memorable formulae that summed up important aspects of what Christians believed about God and about Jesus, and could be used in worship, or called to mind in bearing witness to the gospel, or whatever. But, while there is a delightful legend about the Apostles' Creed which has each of Jesus' disciples, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, composing and contributing his own clause or 'article' to this creed, it is only a legend that grew up in later centuries. You can see it artistically depicted in the image I have used as a 'logo' for this series of studies. It's easy to see why the legend grew up. After all, if this creed did indeed come directly from



the apostles, then its importance and authority could hardly be challenged! But, although it is very ancient, the creed was dubbed 'Apostolic' not because the apostles themselves composed it, but because it was, as we have just seen, an attempt to provide a digest of their witness to Christ as found in the New Testament. The version we use today reaches back to the ninth century CE, but there are far earlier variants of it. Of particular importance is a Greek creed used in baptisms (and recited in question and answer form as in our own baptism liturgy) as early as the middle of the second century CE in the Christian church in Rome, which bears a striking resemblance to the more polished Latin version that has come down to us.

That link with baptism ties in nicely with the supposition that this creed is, in effect, a convenient summary of the sort of things which becoming and being a Christian entails someone in believing. Candidates for baptism would, in the early centuries,



be 'prepared' for baptism during the weeks of Lent, and baptised on Easter Day. And a large part of that preparation would no doubt be spent helping them to grasp how the various articles of the creed they would profess were rooted in the soil of Old

and New Testaments, and how they fitted in with or called into question the wider pattern of beliefs and practices of the contemporary social *milieu*. That, I suppose, is what this short series of studies aspires to too. In the days when the main diet of Anglican worship was Matins and Evensong on a weekly basis, it was sometimes said that any self-respecting Anglican ought at least to be able to recite both the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed! Well, reciting them is one thing, but even parrots can learn to do that. So, we need to go a bit further, and have some clear understanding of what it is that we are professing to believe. And profession is another important aspect of this creed's purpose. Another Latin term that can be translated 'creed' is *symbolum*, which, as we might guess, also means a symbol or a sign of something. A *symbolum* might be worn on your costume or clothing, as an outward and visible indication to others that you belonged to a particular group or party or organisation in society. And so, too, a 'creed' (and especially this creed, with its links with the public event of baptism) was not and ought not to be an essentially private 'code for life' or a bit of esoteric spiritual knowledge shared by holy huddles largely in secret (a sort of religious freemasonry). It was, and is and should be that which Christians are prepared to stand up for and be known by; and that means, of course, that to the best of our ability we should seek to be able to give some account of what it says and what it means.

If, now, we return to the creed's opening words, 'I believe...', what are we to make of them? Perhaps the first and most obvious thing is that, left like that, they make

absolutely no sense in English. 'Believe' is, as we say, a transitive verb which requires an object. In other words, we can't just 'believe'; we have to believe *in*



someone or something. And the Apostles' Creed supplies a helpful list of things that Christians 'believe in'. In one sense, though, most of the articles that follow are an unpacking of or a footnote to the first and most important of all. It has been said that as Christians it is *whom* we believe in that distinguishes us, and that is God. Not any old 'god', but the one

who makes himself known in Scripture's witness to the history of Israel and the person of Jesus, as alluded to in the rest of the creed. But before embarking on the particular bits and pieces that such belief is invested in, it is worth our pausing to take stock at the outset of the peculiar nature of the 'belief' which this God engenders and demands of us. And, for ease of expression as much as anything else, I'm going to stop talking about belief (which tends to connote something a bit rarefied, intellectual and abstract) and talk mostly about 'faith' instead. This word is a bit more concrete and engaged, as is immediately apparent if we now translate *Credo in Deum* as 'I have faith in God', or even 'I put my trust in God'. As we shall see, it's not possible to 'have faith in' within some significant input of *ideas* and some responsible thinking about them, but faith of the sort the creed is speaking about amounts to considerably more than that.

### *Faith as gift*

Perhaps the first thing to note is that having faith (or 'believing') in God is something that God himself is involved in from first to last. In the



Bible Abraham is the great exemplar of faith in God, and, like the many others who follow on, we don't find him sitting around reflecting on life and things in general, and suddenly having a bright idea, or coming to a realization, or deciding that, since

there's nothing else to do, he'll 'get religion' and try believing in God. On the contrary, God calls Abraham (Gen. 12), and summons him into a relationship, seemingly *apropos* of nothing. It's a call that includes an instruction and a promise, and who God himself is will only be unfolded gradually as the story continues. And although Abram (as he still is at this point) believes God and does what God summons him to do, it's quite clear that the initiative and the motive force for the whole enterprise lies with God himself. And that is the pattern throughout Scripture's narration of 'faithful' individuals. Faith begins when God calls them and makes himself known to them, and their faith consists not in a creed (though it may generally involve them *believing* certain things rather than not believing them) but in a relationship into which God summons them and in which God holds and sustains them. Faith is, we might say, a free and undeserved gift – the gift of knowing him and living our lives in the light of his presence and engagement with us. Furthermore, it is a gift that is constantly given afresh, and, like life itself, if God were to withdraw it rather than holding us in it, we should have no resources of our own to generate it, no magic lamp to rub which would summon it up.



This is why the old polarisation between 'faith' and 'works' as the basis of our standing before God is so ridiculous. Faith isn't a performance that we have to successfully complete in order to win God over; it's a relationship that God establishes and holds us in. But nor is faith a vacuous, passive, morally disengaged relationship. On the contrary, being drawn into and held in this relationship can and will, unless we resist and risk it, involve us in 'doing' all sorts of things which show up on the radar as more 'godly' than 'godless'. That's why James, in his epistle, insists that 'faith without works is dead' (2:26). 'Works' (for want of a better and less loaded term) are the natural fruit of faith, of being embedded and rooted in God, held by him, nurtured by him. To ask which is more important is, as C. S. Lewis

notes somewhere, as sensible as asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more important.

*Faith as assent*

But faith does, as we have already seen, involve 'believing' certain things in the sense of granting intellectual assent to them. It is not an alternative to intelligent reckoning with the reality of things, but a form of it; and it certainly provides no excuse for anyone to refuse to grapple with or think through some of the hard questions that reality presents us with. Indeed, if we have faith in the God who is known to us in the Old and New Testaments then we should already know that this same God lays claim not just to our hearts, souls and bodies, but to our minds too, and 'loving God with our whole mind' certainly cannot mean retreat into any sort of unthinking ghetto where the things of faith themselves are concerned.

But, let's be clear. This doesn't mean that we can or should refuse to believe anything until we have full understanding of it, or until its reality has been demonstrated by means of the sort of evidence or 'proof' that we might sometimes like, or that contemporary culture sometimes bandies around as the only canons of what may count as 'real' or be accepted as 'true'. This isn't a consideration peculiar to faith in God of course. We live our lives daily on the basis of all sorts of things we believe to be real and true, but of which we have relatively little understanding, and for the verity of which we certainly have no absolute proof. They are so many that it is impossible even to begin to list them, because most of us have a high level of understanding of only a very few things in life, most of us also have little access to the sorts of scientific and other 'proof' for the reality of the sorts of things that lend themselves to proof at all, and there are many things (and generally the things that matter to us most, the most 'human' realities) that do not lend themselves to such proof at all, but which none of us seriously doubts the reality of as we go about our daily lives.

I drive a car and I use a computer, and I believe implicitly and absolutely in their capacity to do what I want and need them to do, even though I have absolutely no

understanding of how they do it. For these things, and many, many others in my daily life, I am content to know that there are folk who *do* understand (and who will help me if a malfunction occurs!); I feel no need to ‘get my head’ around it all before taking the reality of it all seriously and turning the ignition key or booting up the



computer. I don’t need to understand before I can believe. You might even say that my ‘believing’ is itself in part a very primitive and incomplete form of ‘understanding’ (I can at least *tell* you what I believe a car and a computer can and will do); but it’s perfectly well

grounded in experience, and in my trust of others, and it’s perfectly sufficient for me to function well with such things in the real world. Similarly, I have no access (either in terms of equipment or training in the relevant skills) to whatever it takes to ‘prove’ that certain things are real. I believe that there are microscopic things called bacteria, and spend plenty of energy in trying to avoid their negative invasion of my immune system. No one is more thorough in hand-washing or avoiding coughing into the cup at communion (you’ll be glad to hear). But I’ve never seen any.

Likewise, I’m told (and I believe) that excessive exposure to radiation (whether from the sun, or from more intensive sources) is a bad thing. But whether or not radiation is real or a figment of someone’s imagination I have no way of being sure.

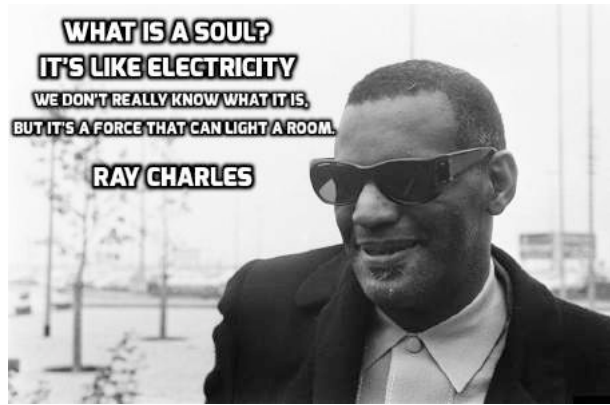
Again, I’ve never seen any, and I’ve never touched any (to the best of my knowledge). But again, believing in the reality of such things is not contingent on my personal ability to demonstrate or prove their reality.



I’m content to trust the testimony of others, who know what they are doing and what they are talking about, and to behave accordingly. Finally, I have no way (because there is no way) to ‘prove’ that all sorts of things that most of us take for granted the reality of are actually real. Goodness, for instance. Or beauty. Or truth itself. Most of us structure our living around the belief or assumption that such



things are real, even if we can't always identify them very precisely; but there is no 'scientific' way of measuring or weighing them. They belong to that domain which the creed calls 'things invisible'. As do other persons. We can demonstrate to our



satisfaction the presence of other bodies in the room with us, and even register their movements and the sounds they make. But when it comes to identifying and interpreting these as the meaningful expressions or meaningful communications of other sentient, intelligent and intentional beings that

we call 'persons', with complex inner lives like our own, there is no way of doing so in the terms commonly demanded by 'scientific' means. Of course, none of us puts our lives on hold, and refuses to behave as if such things were real, simply because we cannot *prove* that it is so. We take the reality of other persons, of moral and aesthetic qualities and standards, and all sorts of other things *for granted* as part of the complex and variegated 'reality' with which we have to deal daily, and don't worry at all about the fact that their very existence remains 'unproven'. Philosophers might worry about that (professionally), and some scientists may insist on telling us that we have no right to believe in the reality of such things, just because their instruments and preferred methods are incapable of registering them. But most of us suppose that this is daft. And rightly so.

God, we may suppose, and the things of God typically fall into this latter category of 'things unseen', and so un-demonstrable and unprovable in any obvious sense. But the same problem (if indeed it *is* a problem rather than



Starving philosophy student grappling with the question of the Toast in the Machine.

just an irritating fact) applies to plenty of other things too. And in the case of God, as in the case of these other things, we come to realize that there are ways of knowing and interpreting their reality which are peculiar to them. We cannot know another person's character or hopes and fears by weighing them, or putting them on a

microscope, or sniffing the air to smell them. These are ways of knowing appropriate to other sorts of things, but not persons. But when bodies in our presence move in certain ways (what we call 'gestures') or make certain sorts of noises (what we call speech), we interpret them as meaningful and respond accordingly. And that seems to work quite well, most of the time. God doesn't have a body (so we are told), which makes knowing God and interpreting God's desires and purposes slightly different. But God, too, can make himself known by appropriating sounds and signs, and through the material realities of the world. These can be God's 'language' just as surely as black squiggles on a page, or noises emitting from our vocal chords, or facial expressions 'speak' to us of the persons who we cannot see or hear at all. And, just as we take their reality for granted, it is perfectly reasonable for believers to interpret the signs of God's activity in this way, and to take his reality for granted



too. In fact, once we have had a genuine experience of God 'speaking' to us, whether through reading Scripture, or

through the preaching of the Word, or through some life experience, or whatever it is, it would make no more sense *not* to take God's reality for granted and to look for further such communication between him and us than it would for us to ignore the jabberings of a French or German (supply your own national of choice) shopkeeper or border guard (this may become more topical duly) simply because we do not fully understand them. Having been on the receiving end of analogous communications before, we naturally sense that there is a person there seeking to communicate with us, and believing this, we persist in our efforts to understand!

There is a well-known definition of theology offered by St Anselm in the twelfth century. He referred to theology as 'faith seeking understanding', and that's a good description not just of theology but of much of our human reckoning with the world. We have a certain grasp on reality, and we trust that we 'know' something of its reality, having good and sufficient reasons for doing so; but we also know that there

is so much more to understand, and are driven by curiosity and the desire for a greater immersion in reality to do so. We don't put our currently partial and provisional knowledge on hold, refusing to admit its value until we know everything (which, of course, we never will). Instead we use it as a springboard or a platform from which to advance ever further and more fully into the regions currently lying beyond our knowledge. And it's like that with



theology too (because 'theology' simply means 'faith, thinking about things, something which anyone with faith does'). Faith isn't a point of arrival, but a point of departure from which we are called to venture ever further in understanding God's promises, purposes and ways of working, and how those factor into the larger picture of 'reality' that we each gradually build up from all the sources of knowledge and experience available to us. Of course, God only calls and expects us to venture as far as we are able; but he does call and expect us to do that, to take the risk and the leap of knowing him more fully.

### *Faith as trust*

Notice that our word 'knowledge' can mean more than one thing. We can acquire lots of knowledge *about* all sorts of things, by reading books, watching documentaries on TV, and yet never actually, as we would say, 'knowing' the things themselves - never having any direct personal contact or engagement with them. In the best situations both sorts of knowledge go together, as we learn more about someone or something through spending time with them, getting to 'know' them better. And where other persons in particular are concerned, that means that knowing will always be a two-way street. We can't really get to know someone properly unless they are *willing* to be known, and share themselves with us.

While, therefore, knowledge of the first sort (knowledge *about*) is an important part of faith (which involves us knowing and believing all sorts of things *about* God), genuine faith is only ever a compound of both sorts of knowing. It involves us in a personal relationship with the God of whom we speak. It involves us not just in believing that God is 'there', but in meeting him, communing with him as with a friend and a Father. It involves us not just in believing that God forgives sins, but in allowing him to forgive our sins. It involves us not just in believing that God is trustworthy, but in actually trusting him with the realities of our own lives. There are plenty of folk who would profess 'belief' in such realities, and who recite the creed with integrity and even vigour, but who have never actually met God, or had their sins forgiven, or stepped out in faith when God has called them.

A story is told about the famous nineteenth century acrobat Charles Blondin who, in 1859, amazed crowds in North America by crossing the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. As if this feat were not remarkable enough, Blondin added some theatrical twists and turns. 'Do you believe', he asked the crowds, 'that I can walk across wearing a blindfold?' 'Yes!!' they roared. And he did. 'Do you believe I can walk across, stop halfway, sit down, cook and eat an omelette?' he asked. 'Yes!!!' they roared. And he



did. 'Do you believe', he asked them again, 'that I can walk across pushing a wheelbarrow?' 'Yes!!' they roared. And he did. 'Do you believe,' he asked, 'that I can walk across pushing a wheelbarrow with a man in it?' 'Yes!!' they roared. So he turned to a particularly enthusiastic man in the front row. 'Will *you* be that man?' he asked.

It's the difference between a certain sort of merely academic 'belief' which is happy to assent to things from the safety of a detached observer's position, and the belief which is also *faith* - an engaged, committed, trusting disposition of the whole person to the truth of things. 'Will *you* be that man?'. Credo doesn't just mean 'I believe' in

the former sense. It means 'I put my trust in' the truth, the reality, the reliability of the one in whom I believe, and am willing to stake my life on it.

### *Faith as consent*

That means, of course, that having faith, saying 'I believe' and *meaning* it, involves an action of will. Faith doesn't *begin* there. It *begins* when God calls us, makes himself available to us, offers to draw us to himself and to begin the work of changing us into the likeness of his Son. And we can only respond, can only have 'faith' because this call, this approach by God has happened and continues to happen afresh each moment. But our response matters. No matter how weak and feeble it may be, God will grasp it and hold it and enable it to flourish. And he is patient with us. But God doesn't coerce or force anyone. And, unless and until we grant our consent to his laying hold of us, we remain on the periphery, untouched by the reality of God's forgiving and transforming love which is there, waiting for us, longing for us to



respond. He won't coerce or force, because deciding to put our trust in him means taking the first step on a wholly new and different way of living. That's the point of the New Testament's language of 'repentance' which, as we probably all know, means 'turning

around'. To turn to God in faith and trust him is incompatible with continuing to invest ourselves and our energies in lots of other things, some of which are simply bad, and others of which are perfectly good as long as they don't get elevated in our lives to the status of 'false gods'. Faith in God is exclusive of putting our 'faith' in a whole host of other things in the same sense. And turning to God in faith therefore means 'turning away' from these things, turning our backs on them, at least until our sensibilities and priorities are reordered, and we can see them and judge them aright. It's a life-changing decision (and, in truth, it's a decision we shall continue to have to make daily), and no one should be coerced into it.

### *Faith as joy*

In Acts 16 we read the story of the Philippian jailer – the one who had Paul and Silas safely locked up, until an earthquake in the middle of the night broke open the doors and the fixing of the chains which bound them there. The jailer, we are told, was about to kill himself, supposing that they would have escaped, and his life would be forfeit to the authorities. But Paul and Silas hadn't gone anywhere, and the story continues with the jailer and his family hearing the good news about Jesus, and repenting and being baptized. And, Luke tells us, 'he and his entire household *rejoiced* that he had become a believer in God'.

The difference that faith of the sort to which the creed gives expression makes is always a source of deep and lasting joy, however much it may be accompanied by difficulties, pains and sorrows. It is no bed of roses. But once our life is set in the context of a well-ordered relationship with the reality of God, the tapestry of very different bits and pieces of which any and every life is made up looks and feels very different. The bits and pieces are the same ones, but suddenly they take on a quite new hue and a new significance.

