

Presidential Address

Guildford Diocesan Synod, March 2025

It's not often that the Church gets to celebrate a 1700-year anniversary – an anniversary that predates the arrival of St. Augustine to these shores by more than 250 years, and the founding of Chertsey Abbey just up the road – the first religious community in Surrey – seventy years later. But on May 20th 325, some three hundred bishops, along with more than a thousand presbyters and deacons, met in the town of Nicaea in modern-day Turkey for an ecumenical council, by order of Constantine, the Roman Emperor. And that seems like a significant enough anniversary for a presidential address.

The Emperor's invitation to the bishops still survives today, where he writes that he chose Nicaea 'because of the excellent temperature of the air' and that he planned to be present as a spectator and contributor himself. And it's clear that Constantine – who'd only been a Christian himself for a little more than a decade – made the very most of the opening ceremony, appearing, in the word of Eusebius, *'like some heavenly angel of God, his bright mantle shedding lustre like beams of light, shining with the fiery radiance of a purple robe, and decorated with the dazzling brilliance of gold and precious stones'*: plenty of imperial bling in other words! The decision to give his Presidential Address in Latin, though, didn't go down so well, as the large majority of the delegates were Greek speakers, and there weren't the banks of translators available that we had at the Lambeth Conference back in 2022.

The Council lasted around two months – far outstripping the 12-day Lambeth Conference – and culminated in the bishops being invited to the huge celebrations that accompanied the 20th anniversary of Constantine's reign. And it must have been a time of some intensity, given the purpose of the gathering. Because the Church was divided over a whole number of issues, both theological and practical; those divisions had publicly surfaced since the death of Diocletian and the end to Christian persecution across the Roman Empire - and Constantine's intention was to bash some episcopal heads together, so as to prevent the spread of heresy and a further fragmentation of the Christian movement which he himself was so keen to promote.

The most famous outcome of the 1st Council of Nicaea was the Nicene Creed, which the bishops went through line by line, and eventually agreed to unanimously. Part of its purpose was to squash a heresy popularised by a presbyter called Arius, who taught that Jesus was created by God before the rest of Creation, and that, in his own words, 'there was a time when Jesus was not'. Indeed Christology – the question of 'Who is Jesus?' - was at the heart of most of the divisions that threatened to undermine the Church's witness. And so the Nicene Creed especially focussed on this point:

*'We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,*

*begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made’.*

The Nicene Creed was also the first to begin ‘We believe’ not ‘I believe’: emphasising that here was the Church’s teaching, and the proper limits of Christian orthodoxy, rather than simply expressing a personal faith.

Alongside the Creed, the bishops at the 1st Council of Nicaea agreed 20 Canons of the church, ranging from some that seem rather esoteric in the 21st century to some that remain today – for example the rule that a minimum of three bishops are required to consecrate a new bishop, and only with the authority of the Metropolitan, or Archbishop. Usury was forbidden for the clergy – lending money at high interest rates to supplement their stipends – and Provincial Synods were to be held twice a year, as is the normal practice of General Synod today.

Meanwhile clergy or laity excommunicated in one diocese were not entitled just to move house and worship in the diocese next door – that is, unless they’d been excommunicated through the petty jealousy of their previous bishop – shades of Clergy Current Status Letters here and CDMs; whilst no priest was allowed to share a home with a woman, unless they were his mother, sister, aunt, or other persons who, quote, were ‘above suspicion’. For some reason, Mrs Doyle in Father Ted comes to mind!

And then there was the tricky issue of when to date Easter – whether to go with the Jewish dating of the Passover weekend - which some critics claimed was all wrong, because it ignored the timing of the equinox; or to calculate the date of Easter independently of the Jewish community. The bishops decided to go with the latter option, although this was a controversy that never went away, and still separates the Western churches from the Eastern Orthodox ones. It’s a nice piece of serendipity that this year of the 1700th anniversary of the Council is also an unusual year when the Western Easter and Eastern Easter happen to fall on the same day!

So here are some reasons why the Council of Nicaea still matters, even 1700 years on:

Nicaea matters first, because **Christology is important**: for so many of the really big questions in life – ‘Do I matter?’ ‘Am I loved?’ ‘What’s my purpose?’ ‘Is this all there is?’ depend on a bigger question still: ‘Who is Jesus?’ Indeed, that’s the big theme underlying the whole of John’s Gospel; and I’m looking forward to propounding it at Leatherhead Parish Church tomorrow morning, who are currently focussing on the great ‘I AM’ sayings in John, with tomorrow’s episode featuring ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life’.

Nicaea matters secondly, because **Creeds are important**, and particularly creeds that begin ‘**We** believe’, that set out the basic boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. In past generations, some theologians and even clergy and bishops have tested those boundaries: I was an enthusiastic young 16-year-old Christian when ‘The Myth of God Incarnate’ was published – which was a little more nuanced than the title suggested, but was still some way outside of traditional Credal teaching. And Christians – and especially

those in churches that never recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creed – need to beware of becoming theology-lite, and detached from that rich and ancient heritage that helps to root us in the faith of the apostles. It is entirely right that every clergy person and local lay minister in the Church of England promises, quote, 'to affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness'; and reaffirms that at the beginning of each fresh chapter of their ministry.

Nicaea matters, thirdly, because **Synods are important**: a gathering solely of Bishops and clergy 1700 years ago, which has since been supplemented in many churches by laity in our synodical structure. The word 'Synod' comes from two Greek words – 'sun', which means 'together' and 'hodos', which means 'way', so a Synod is literally a walking together on the way, united in Christ who is the 'hodos, the aletheia and the zoe', the way, the truth and the life. And of course our Synods fall a long way short of that ideal, all too often, and that was even true of the first Council of Nicaea. But the vision for meetings like this one, and gatherings of our General Synod in London and York is one of Christians meeting together in prayer and rigorous debate, and seeking to chart the way ahead, as we seek the leading of God's Holy Spirit step by step.

And Nicaea matters, fourthly, because **Unity is important**: a unity of the Spirit built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone – as expressed in the Creeds and monitored by the Canons. Nicaea is known as an 'ecumenical council', because Constantine brought together bishops from both East and West, including a number who needed to be restored to the fellowship. And such ecumenical unity both within and between our churches is a precious gift wherever it can be found – a powerful answer to the prayer of Jesus our great High Priest that we might be one within the unity that exists between Himself and His Father, so that, quote, 'the world may believe that you have sent me'.

The Church was in danger of squandering that unity 1700 years ago, which is why the Roman Emperor, no less, had to intervene; and it has been in danger of squandering that unity ever since, not least in our own time – though today's controversies are less to do with the Godhead and more to do with human identity. And while we may well have strong views here, on matters that are not credal but are still of considerable theological and pastoral significance, how important that we are patient with one another, and don't simply rush ahead, in order that our synodality – our Togetherness on the Way – doesn't break down irretrievably.

I thought at this point that we might stand and affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. But I suggest that we do that right at the end of our Synod this morning, as a sign of our commitment to one another, to our Synodical life, to the fundamental boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, and above all to the Christ who is

*'Eternally begotten of the Father,
'God from God, Light from Light,
'True God from true God'.*