



BULLETIN INSERTS

October 19, 2025 – Pentecost 19 (C)

The Nicene Creed: Week 6

To commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the Rt. Rev. Matthew Gunter, bishop of Wisconsin, has written a series of reflections on the Nicene Creed and its relevance for contemporary Episcopalians. Over the coming weeks, we'll share his teachings, written mostly in a question-and-answer format.

But isn't the language of the Creed poetic, rich in metaphors? Theologically and philosophically, “metaphor” is a tricky concept, but we'll use it for the moment. We should never forget that even our best language cannot fully comprehend God, who is always beyond our comprehension. In fact, you'd have a hard time finding a theologian of the early Church who did not say the same. They were not so naïve as moderns often suppose. Over and over again, the early theologians remind us that all our language for God is stammering. All images must be held lightly. Gregory Nazianzus, one of the more important defenders of the Creed, affirmed, “It is difficult to conceive of God, but to define him in words is an impossibility” (*Fourth Theological Oration*).

And yet those same theologians also affirm that we must speak of God because God has spoken a Word to us in history, especially in Jesus Christ. Thus, while we must speak cautiously and humbly in the face of the mystery that is God, we can yet dare to say something about God because God has said something to us in Jesus, the Word made flesh. “The impossibility has become a possibility by the boundless excellence of the grace of God,” is how Origen put it in his treatise *On Prayer*.

Because it is about God, some of the Creed is indeed metaphorical. Certainly, referring to God as “Father,” while it reflects the language of Jesus and signifies something true about God, does not mean God is male. Gregory of Nyssa, another foundational theologian who defended the Nicene Creed, is clear on this in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Similarly, affirming that Jesus Christ is “seated at the right hand of God the Father” metaphorically signifies something about the relationship between Jesus and God the Father, but it is not a spatial relationship. There is no literal physical chair on which Jesus sits.

But, because the Creed is about the God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus much of it is not metaphorical, but historical, e.g., he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man, for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, on the third day he rose again, etc. That has always been the scandal of Christianity to the philosophers and Gnostics (ancient and contemporary) who want to keep God safely on the side of the metaphorical beyond the messiness of material reality in space and time (protecting God? themselves?). But Christians confess a historical virgin birth to a historical Mary of an historical enfleshment of God who died an historical death under an historical Pontius Pilate but lives again through an historical resurrection, leaving behind an historical empty tomb – all “for us and for our salvation.”

The Creed is part poetry, part prose. Indeed, one might say that in the incarnation, God (ultimately hidden in Mystery and Metaphor) has become prose – prosaic – in order to turn all to poetry. Trying to keep them strictly separate or make it all one or the other always gets us into trouble.

To say that our language about God's essence is metaphorical is a theological truism. To conclude that, therefore, all metaphors for God are only human creations or that all metaphors are more or less equal is an assumption and a theological falsehood. To say that all language about God acting in history, e.g., the virginal conception, the incarnation, and the bodily resurrection as historical, physical events, is metaphorical and only true in some spiritual sense is to try to be more spiritual than the God we know through Jesus has chosen to be. This was the fundamental error of the Arians. Arius found it inconceivable and offensive to imagine the One beyond all things taking on human flesh and material reality. The God we know through Jesus and the Creed is a God who is prepared to get down and dirty in the material world to address and transform the very literal, tragic, and historical mess we have made of ourselves, others, and the world. And all so that we might be “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). As some of the bishops who were at the Council of Nicaea would say, the Son of God “became what we are that we might become what he is” (for example, Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*).