

Both Seen and Unseen

The Nicene Creed is by far the oldest of the confessional statements we use in the church today, much older, for example, than what we call the Apostles' Creed we use more use here at First, use more often simply because it's shorter, more or less an abbreviation of the longer Nicene Creed. It dates in its earliest form back to the year 325 AD, though the version of it that is normally used today is a later and slightly revised version of the creed adopted in 381. Since that time, it has been the authoritative statement of Christian belief, the touchstone of historic Christianity, the one confession of faith to which most Christians in the world today would largely subscribe.

There is a phrase, though, right at the beginning of the creed, that I've always found somewhat puzzling, even a little odd. For the most part I've always chalked that up to the ancient character of this creed, considering the phrase merely an archaic remnant of a long-ago time. It is the phrase "both seen and unseen," which in some English versions is rendered "both visible and invisible." The creed begins: *We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, both seen and unseen...*

Now what does that mean, "both seen and unseen?" Why is that thought to be something that needs to be said? To the extent I'd ever thought much about those words, I had simply assumed that what is "seen" refers to the physical world all around us, whereas what is "unseen" refers to the spiritual realm of angels and demons, a very prominent reality for the early centuries of the common era, a time when—in the words of a famous church historian—the "sky hung low." "Both seen and unseen," then, would simply be a poetic way of saying "everything." But as I read and reflected upon our scripture lessons for today, I began to suspect there's more to these words than I'd thought, something more in fact that is still relevant for us today, perhaps every bit as much as it was in the 4th century when these words were originally composed.

Basically, what's at issue here is the nature of reality, that is to say, the question of what is real and what is not real. Whether reality is to be found in the physical world all around us, the realm of things that are "seen," or in the spiritual world, a realm that may be unseen but whose presence is very much felt or discerned. This is what Paul is touching on in the famous sermon recorded in the Book of Acts, a portion of which we read this morning, a sermon preached in Athens on the Areopagus, a prominent place just below the Acropolis and near the ancient temple of the god the Romans called Mars, and the Greeks called Aries, thus Aries' hill, or Areopagus.

Here, Paul is talking to people for whom the boundary between the seen and unseen worlds was quite porous, a time when various spirits and demons were considered to be a very real part of everyday life. But while the unseen world was undeniably real for Paul, very much so, here he cautions his listeners against too much speculation about God on the basis of what they imagine that unseen world to be, an effort he compares to groping blindly for something in the dark, and then coming up with all sorts of wild ideas about what's out there, ideas which are

much more likely to be the fruit of our imagination, than they are the product of anything substantive and real.

Which is why, then, he suggests that the ideas that we conjure up about God on the basis of our blind gropings in the unseen world are highly suspect. Far more trustworthy a basis for our knowledge of God—according to Paul—is the revelation of God in the person—the very visible and very real person—of Jesus Christ, in whom we have seen God in a much clearer and more definitive way, than anything we come up with on the basis of some conjured up or imagined spiritual reality. For Paul, it was simple. If you want to know what God is like, then start with Jesus. Not with what you imagine God to be like.

With the Gospel of John, though, we encounter more or less the opposite problem. Here, we run up against some in the community of believers who insist on believing to be real only what they can see and touch, and thus dismissing the unseen world as a transient and ephemeral realm which is of very little ultimate meaning. Where this became a critical issue for early Christians was in the significance they attached to the resurrection. For many of his followers, the real Jesus was the man they had known walking the roads of Galilee, the man who had healed hundreds and preached to thousands, who had proclaimed the kingdom of God and who for that had been—all too visibly—crucified by the Romans. For others, though, the real Jesus was the one who had been raised from the dead, a risen Lord who had been seen by some, a few, but unseen by most, having appeared only to the believers. This risen Lord was still present among us in the person of the Holy Spirit, who though we cannot see or touch, is more real for us by far than those things we can, that we can see and touch.

So which is it? Who was—and is—the real Jesus? Is it the Jesus whose birth in a stable in Bethlehem we commemorate every Christmas? The Jesus whose carefully preserved teachings give direction to our lives? The Jesus whose acts of mercy are the example we try to follow? The Jesus whose sacred memory is recorded for us in the gospels which we read and ponder every week here in church? Isn't that the real Jesus?

Or is it the Jesus who was raised from the dead, who appeared to some of the believers but not to others, whose spirit continues among us still, guiding and directing us, though unseen and unknown by the world outside? Which is the real Jesus, the Jesus in whom we place our trust, the Jesus in whom we believe?

Not surprisingly, in the early years of the church, those who had known Jesus best, the apostles who had been his disciples, those who had traveled throughout Galilee and Judea with him, who had heard his teaching and seen his healing, and whose memories of all that were the primary source of the gospels, were inclined toward this being the real Jesus. They were naturally skeptical of those who had never known that Jesus (or his disciples), but who instead claimed to have been inspired by the spirit of the risen Lord, and were particularly skeptical when claims for the risen Lord didn't quite square with their own memories of Jesus. Others in the church, though, proclaimed almost exclusively a risen Lord, those for whom the real Jesus *was* the risen Jesus, those who were shockingly indifferent to the biographical "facts" of Jesus' life, and who for that reason dismissed the gospels as of little or no consequence, particularly when weighed against the spiritual knowledge they felt had been revealed to them. So which is it?

It was largely to answer this question that the Nicene Creed was written, the product of the first world-wide gathering of Christian leaders, a gathering (or council) called by the Emperor Constantine himself, in an attempt to get all Christians to agree at least on the basic tenets of our faith. The answer the council came up with to the question of which was the real Jesus, the one we see in the flesh, or the one whose spirit informs us, was...*both!* Both are the real Jesus, for God is the maker of heaven and earth, of all things both seen and unseen. Meaning that Jesus was both the man who lived among us, teaching and healing and proclaiming the good news, and the man who was raised from the dead and whose Spirit continued to inform and guide the church to that very day. He was both. He was not one or the other. Which kept the church firmly rooted in the world around us, even as it proclaimed the gospel of a risen Lord whose spirit abides among us still.

That answer is just as relevant for us today, as it was back then, because we are still confronted by what is essentially the same issue. Not in exactly the same way Christians were in the 4th century, of course, but still an issue, and nowhere more so than in the difficulty the church has had accommodating its theology, and in particular, its view of the physical world around us, to developments in the world of the natural sciences, something that has been an enormous challenge for the church, and particularly the Protestant Church, since the days of Darwin and even before. I say the Protestant Church because early on we hitched our wagon to the march of scientific progress, claiming to be fully open to the truth of scientific discoveries, unlike the Roman Catholic Church with all its problems with Galileo and others. Not us.

Until suddenly we weren't. Weren't for some because science started challenging some deeply held beliefs, and weren't for others who simply have had difficulty absorbing fully the true implications of the advances of modern science. Because we've had such a hard time harmonizing science and theology, we have a harder and harder time talking about the world, the realm of things that are seen, in any kind of coherent and convincing fashion. To put it bluntly, all too often we don't know what we're talking about, and that fact is painfully obvious to those who do. If the first thing out of our mouth when we confess our faith is that we believe in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, of all things both seen and unseen..., then we really need to know just exactly what that means, what it is that we're claiming to believe. Frankly, I'm not sure we do, and that's a big problem.

A big problem, because it means we are falling back more and more into a largely spiritual realm, the realm of the unseen, which would be fine and entirely appropriate if it were balanced by a firm grasp of the realm of the seen, a true understanding of the physical world around us, something that can keep our faith anchored to some basic reality. But if there's no anchor, if there's not a sort of built in reality check for our theology, then we're back to exactly the same problem Paul talked about that day on the Areopagus, we're back to groping in the dark, imagining a God on the basis of our feelings and very little more. And that's not just an unknown God; that is no god at all.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*