

A Council was to be held—a council of the whole Church throughout the world. And it was to be graced with the presence of the Emperor Constantine. From all parts Bishops had been summoned to attend. So Rome and Africa, Asia, France, the wilds of Germany, and (it has been said) even Britain contributed representatives to the assembly. From north, south, east, and west, a stream of men flocked in, whose furrowed brows and wan faces bespoke them to be men of thought and devotion.

Never was such a sight seen in Nicæa before. Dusty and travel-stained, some on foot, some on mules and horses, in the garb of their own nationalities, with or without attendants, they came to the Council. Some were old and infirm, and bore ill the fatigues of their long journey. Others were young and vigorous, and fired with enthusiasm.

Amongst the company were two from Egypt—Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, and Athanasius, his attendant Archdeacon. The latter was a young man, not thirty years old. But his great ability and saintliness of character had already marked him out among his contemporaries.

My reader has already asked what was the purpose of this Council? Why was it summoned? What matter of sufficient importance could there be to bring men long distances, when travelling was so slow and tedious—so perilous and expensive?

The answer is that the fourth century witnessed the rise of a heresy which bid fair to extinguish the doctrine of Christ. It was a century in which false teaching was threatening to over-master the true.

‘When withering blasts of error swept the sky,
And Love’s last flower seemed fain to droop
and die.’

The Arian heresy—so called after its founder, Arius, a priest of Alexandria—had risen and spread with alarming rapidity. Arius taught that our blessed Lord was of an inferior nature to God the Father. He did not exist, he said, from everlasting. There was a time when He was created. In fact, Arius came to regard Christ as only one, though the highest, of God’s creatures.

Such teaching, we can see, was quite un-

scriptural. He should have remembered how our Lord said, ‘I and the Father are (essentially) One’; and how S. John states that ‘He was in the beginning with God’—nay, ‘that He was God,’ and that ‘all things were made by Him.’ He should not have forgotten how S. Paul says that ‘in Christ dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily,’ ‘that He is God blessed for ever,’ and that being so He ‘thought it not robbery to be equal with God.’ He might have thought of the words of the once-doubting, now believing Thomas: ‘My Lord and my God.’

But further, he should have seen—what was plain enough to the Bishops at Nicæa—how such wrong teaching went far to undermine the very foundations of the Christian Faith. If Jesus were not God, He could not be a Saviour. The shedding of His blood could make no atonement. ‘For none by any means can redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him.’ The preaching of the Cross must have been in vain, and the world have perished in its sins.

Had the teaching of Arius triumphed, his gospel might have blazed up in momentary popularity, but it would have sunk down in a few years and have become extinct, leaving no Christianity behind.

It was to consider and pass judgment upon this Arian heresy that the Council met at Nicæa. The discussion was grave and reverent, as became the occasion. The doctrines of Arius were examined, and witnesses heard in his defence. All was done as in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

At length Athanasius rose and addressed the assembled Bishops. We can but imagine the scene—how intently all eyes were fixed upon him as he spoke—how he pointed out the errors of the Arian party in no sparing way. With what burning words he pleaded for the honour of his Lord!

The day was won, and the Truth prevailed. Arius was condemned, and his teaching declared to be false. And the result of the meeting was the *Nicene Creed*.

Clearly and distinctly was the Godhead of our Lord affirmed to be the true doctrine of the Church. That He was God of (i.e.,