

"WE BELIEVE" – THE WHAT, THE WHY & THE HOW

Every Sunday, we stand here and we recite the Creed – "I believe ...", "We believe ...". And at baptisms and confirmations, we join in the same words as part of the Affirmation of Vows.

It's concise, precise, reasonably clear once we've worked out the difficult phrases. And it's unchanging.

Unchanging. That's what draws my attention to it. We happily mess around with the Prayer Book and the Bible – we amend them, we simplify them, we re-translate them ... we pervert them, we ruin them But the Creed we leave alone.

There are two creeds in our regular liturgies – the Nicene, which we say in the Eucharist, and the Apostles', which we say in Morning and Evening Prayer. The Apostles' is probably the oldest – somewhere around the middle of the 2nd century, but we have no real proof of that.

To the Nicene Creed, on the other hand, we can give an exact date – because it was originally drafted for the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. However (just to complicate things for you), the version we use is not that one: it's an amendment of Nicaea formally issued at the Council of Constantinople 56 years later in 381.

Whatever the exact dates (and who cares?), it's pretty impressive, isn't it? For more than 1600 years, our core beliefs have remained the same – no additions, no subtractions ... a few small changes in the translation, but essentially the same.

I ask you: is this a Good Thing or a Bad Thing?

My purpose this morning is to trace the development of this document we call "The Creed" – to look at the context in which it was written and some of the reasons why it is what it is. Next Sunday, Kent will take a closer look at what it means, and the extent to which it conveys the actual Gospel that was

transmitted through the apostles and the early Church. Finally, two weeks from today, we will hold a discussion - a free-for-all - in which I hope you will air your own views about this Creed that we say so often and (speaking for myself) so mechanically.

It's not my place to criticize the Nicene Creed, or even to analyze it in any meaningful way - my job is to tell you how it came into existence - but I've always thought it rather odd that Jesus Christ doesn't do for the Creed what he demonstrably does do for Christianity as a whole. Sure, the Creed recognizes Jesus as divine and "consubstantial" (that is, 'of the same being') with God the Father and the Holy Spirit - but nowhere does it speak of him as the God of Love. And I would have thought that idea of God - that *property* of God, as Love - is rather fundamental to our whole religion. But far be it from me to editorialize

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What we're talking about are the first 300 years of Christianity. They begin with the crucifixion in 30-33 (no one knows the precise date) - a terrible event that very few witnessed, but the word of mouth would have spread quickly throughout Judea and Galilee.

Then we get this extraordinary 40-day period between the Resurrection and the Ascension, known as The Great Commission, during which Jesus himself, the Risen Christ, appeared to his apostles and gave them their commission. The most famous version of that commission is reported in the last verses of Matthew's gospel: On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus calls on his followers to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. "And remember", he says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age".

What sense that commission made to those 11 men, we do not know. But within a few days, after Jesus had finally left them, all things became possible when they were invested with the Holy Spirit at the Feast of Pentecost. Suddenly they were a band of brave, determined, committed men, setting out to fulfill Jesus' commission - to make disciples of all nations.

And they did - or certainly, they began that process in a most impressive way! Against all the odds, despite persecution and terrible dangers to themselves and their families, they began to create a living church.

This is what we call The Apostolic Age - the few decades in which Jesus' apostles and his closest friends and relatives got the word out - the actual witnesses of his life, death and resurrection.

More than that - much more: they created (and, in large part, they committed to writing) a theology of Christianity, a Christology - an explanation of the astonishing events of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Paul, the late convert, was largely responsible for that, but he was by no means the only one - though it has to be said that he made much the greatest contribution, partly because of his writing and his mastery of Greek, partly because of his willingness to travel far and wide in an age when travel was difficult and dangerous,

- It was during this time - the Apostolic Age - that all Paul's letters were written, as well as the other letters, or epistles, that are collected in the New Testament.
- Even more important, it was the time when the three synoptic gospels were written (Matthew, Mark and Luke - "synoptic", meaning "seen together", because they clearly come from the same source - they share many of the same stories, often in the same sequence, and in remarkably similar wording).
- And it was also the time (at the very end of the Apostolic Age, when very few actual witnesses were still alive) when the most remarkable document of all came into being - the Gospel of John, the same story, but so much more powerful because it recognizes, from the beginning, who Jesus was and is - the Son of God, who is also God himself, the Creator, the Source, the Word.

So, even before the first century A.D. is ended, the Apostolic Age is over. The great documents of our religion have all been written and published - and I mean that in a first century sense of what "published" meant: they were written on papyrus or parchment; they were copied multiple times (accurately or inaccurately); and they were bound into "codexes" or "codices", which were the earliest forms of books -

handwritten parchment and papyrus pages bound between wooden boards, held together by leather thongs. And then they were sent out by couriers and messengers to all parts of the Mediterranean, and eventually beyond. All over this vast area, "churches" were being formed - small groups of believers, usually meeting in secret, probably in their own homes, just beginning to understand the meaning of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist. It was very exciting - and very dangerous.

The Apostolic Age, by definition, was brief. Soon, all the witnesses were dead and we enter what is rather muddlingly called the Age of the Apostolic Fathers. These were people who had known the original apostles, who had listened to them, learned at their feet, heard their eye-witness accounts. They were men like Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna and Clement of Rome. They were leaders of Christian churches in these far-flung places - bishops, teachers, and (what makes them so important) direct inheritors of The Word because they were pupils of the first apostles and disciples. Ignatius and Polycarp were students of St. John the Apostle; while Clement was a youthful follower of St. Peter and (by Peter's own request) one of his successors as Bishop of Rome.

But who was to say what "the true faith" was and was not? And who was to impose order and discipline on this grass-roots church that had spread so far, so fast? Well, priests and bishops, *of course*. A *hierarchy* was created, and we have the beginnings of the Roman Catholic Church, created around, and in the name of, Peter (the first Bishop of Rome) and built, over the centuries, into an iron structure that would give the church enormous strength (but it was too often secular strength rather than spiritual strength) and it would bring it into increasing disrepute. But that is part of another, later story

Nevertheless, it is during this Age of the Apostolic Fathers that we have the first evidence of the Christian Church attempting to codify its beliefs into a formal statement. It was called a "Symbol of Faith", and it was probably developed in Rome somewhere around the year 150 A.D.

I don't think the demand for this Symbol of Faith - this statement of belief - will necessarily have originated in Rome. It was about that time (in North Africa, especially) that "baptismal interrogations" were introduced -

lists of questions about Christian belief that 'trainee Christians' had to answer before they could be baptized. And if you had a list of questions, then there had to be correct answers, didn't there?

What made this even more critical was that it was also a time when core Christian beliefs were being argued and disputed all around the Mediterranean, into Africa on one side, into Gaul and as far away as Britain on the other. It was hardly surprising. The eye witnesses to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus were gone. The writings - the epistles and gospels - were out there, but they weren't yet widely accessible. So who was Authority? What was Correct Christian Belief? Remote Christian communities needed to know who they should baptize, and who they should not. Questions were formulated for the baptismal interrogations - "Do you believe in God the Father?", "... In Jesus Christ, the Son of God?", "... In the Holy Ghost?" ... and so forth (exactly the same questions we ask today).

So the Symbol of Faith was created as an official and authoritative answer to these questions. And there are grounds to believe that it was ultimately (but not quite yet) developed into what we now call The Apostles' Creed - which we say at Morning and Evening Prayer. More of this anon.

So after the Apostolic Age and the Age of the Apostolic Fathers, we enter into what (for want of a better name) is known as "the Ante-Nicene period" - the period before the Council of Nicaea - a period of rather less than 200 years, from about 150 to 325 A.D. It's a period that was characterized by this growing hierarchy in the church, and the attempt to define and establish "The True Faith" in the face of what can best be described as an epidemic of false beliefs or heresies (that, at any rate, is what they came to be called once the True Faith had been established and promulgated).

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What follows may seem like a diversion - but it isn't. The most important thing that happened in this Ante-Nicene period was the conversion to Christianity of the most powerful person in the world, the Emperor Constantine. It happened when he was about 40-years-old, when he was actually co-Emperor rather than sole Emperor in his own right, and it happened just before a battle Constantine fought against a rival called

Maxentius. While marching towards Milvian Bridge, where the battle would take place next day, just north of Rome, Constantine "saw with his own eyes in the heavens a trophy of the cross arising from the light of the sun, carrying the message *In Hoc Signo Vinces* - "In this sign, you will conquer". The following night, Constantine had a dream in which Christ appeared with the same sign and told Constantine to make a standard for his army in the form of the sign. Eusebius, the historian I've been quoting, described the sign as what we call the *ChiRho* - the two Greek letters which are the first two letters of the word for Christ: an X (Chi) with a P (Rho) driven through it. And this was the sign that Constantine and his troops carried to victory at Milvian Bridge the next day. (Not by coincidence, I assure you, this is the same sign that is carved into the original altar in this church, and which we feature on several of our vestments and altar hangings).

Constantine did not formally become a Christian at that stage. He wasn't baptized until he was on his deathbed, 25 years later. But what he did in the wake of his dream and the Battle of Milvian Bridge was even more important for the burgeoning Christian faith. He issued the Edict of Milan in 313 in which he (and his co-Emperor, Licinius) granted religious freedom to the entire Roman Empire. You can imagine what an enormous step that was for Christianity: it meant there was no longer persecution (not state-sponsored persecution, anyway), that Christianity need no longer be a secretive, hole-in-the-corner religion. In practice, Constantine went beyond toleration. He *tolerated* paganism and other religions, but he actively promoted Christianity - and he did so with the rather extraordinary advantage of not being a declared Christian himself. Wisely, the Church itself listened very carefully to his advice, and almost always followed it.

Constantine understood the power that this new, fast-growing religion would have, and he knew that it was a potential threat to his power as Emperor - especially, he thought, if it was the subject of strife and instability within communities. That, I think, explains why he was one of those who led the search for "orthodoxy" - the true, authoritative faith. He didn't want a lot of rival Christian sects battling each other over doctrine. And certainly, he was one of the loudest voices urging the church leaders to take action to resolve the most notable dispute at this time (perhaps the most challenging the Church has ever faced, because it concerned the absolute fundamental of Christianity - the nature of God).

It was known as Arianism because its chief progenitor was a man in Alexandria in Egypt named Arius. Arius preached that Jesus was different from other men because he had, indeed, been a direct creation of God - an "intervention" by God, you might say - but he was not eternal like the Father, and he was certainly not consubstantial (of the same being) with the Father. In Arius' view, he was merely an instrument God had created for a particular purpose - which he had performed and (to put it bluntly) been killed off once he had fulfilled his purpose (which was God's purpose).

It was specifically to deal with this heresy (for that was how church leaders perceived it) that Constantine advised the leaders to call the Council of Nicaea - which they did in 325, just 12 years after the Edict of Toleration.

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Nicaea would be the first of the great councils of the church, and it's not difficult to see why it was necessary. The Church was very thinly spread over a vast expanse of the Middle World, both north and south of the Mediterranean Sea. Communications were slow; and Rome, at this stage, held a very loose hegemony. There was no College of Cardinals - in fact, no cardinals at all, so popes were elected in a series of improvised, and rather questionable, elections. In any case, Constantine's conversion had changed everything! If Christianity was going to become a powerful and recognized religion within the Roman Empire, then the Emperor himself would require a say in who became Pope. Moreover (just to make things even more complicated), so far as Constantine was concerned, Rome wasn't necessarily the center of the world. He had other ideas.

And that was how the council came to meet in Nicaea. Nicaea was an Hellenic (or Greek) city in north-western Anatolia, in what is now Turkey and was then often referred to as Asia Minor. What Constantine liked about Nicaea was that it was only a few miles from the great new city he was building on the site of an existing town called Byzantium. It eventually became the city we call Istanbul, but for most of its history it was known as Constantinople. The Emperor evidently thought it would be useful to give the Christian Church a preview of what he hoped would become his (and its?) new capital.

In the years after Nicaea, councils would become quite the fashion. If we just count the major ones, there have been 20 since Nicaea. Vatican II in the 1960s was the most recent. But there was also one *before* Nicaea, and it was, in a way, the inspiration for all the others (certainly for the early ones). The Council of Jerusalem (it's sometimes called The Apostolic Council) met in or around the year 50. You can read about it in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15. It was attended, we're told, by "the apostles and elders of the church", and it was called at the request of Paul and Barnabas, who traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem to attend it. The cause they championed was the *Gentile* cause. They'd been doing a roaring business in Antioch and Phoenicia and Samaria converting gentiles to Christianity - but certain parties in Jerusalem, hearing of this, had sent people down to those places to insist that Gentiles could only become Christians if they promised they would faithfully observe most parts of the Law of Moses, including the absolute necessity for male circumcision. The Council, fired up by a speech from Peter, and certainly urged on by Paul and Barnabas, agreed that this was nonsense, and the Council released gentile converts from the requirement for circumcision - though it retained the Mosaic prohibitions against fornication, idolatry, and the eating of blood, or meat containing blood. It was one of the early church's seminal decisions, and it was announced by James, the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

The Jerusalem Council had done a very *positive* thing: it had made it possible for gentiles to become Christians without having, first, in effect, to become Jews. It had opened up the whole world to Christianity. Nicaea's job was harder and (on the surface) rather *negative*, because Arianism was by no means the only "heresy" to have surfaced in the short history of the Church up to that point. In its zeal to cut through the minefields and decide what was orthodox and what was not, what was Christian belief and what was not, the Council inevitably negated a lot of people's prized theological positions.

Arianism, as we've seen, denied the divinity of Jesus, which is (let's face it) rather central to Christianity. So you can see why it caused so much angst. And there were lots more of these 'false beliefs' - Adoptionism,

Docetism, Marcionism, Montanism they go on and on, a litany of forgotten names, and I don't intend to dizzy you with their details.

But one of them is worth noting - because it had so many adherents and lingered on for so many centuries. Gnosticism was the belief that the material world was a prison created by a fallen or evil spirit, who was the god of the material world. But worse, Gnostics identified this evil spirit as the God of the Hebrew Bible. Men's souls could be liberated, they thought, by the possession of secret knowledge (that's the Greek word *gnosis*) which would enable them to free themselves from the evil god and return to the true God in the realm of light. The idea of *gnosis*, secret knowledge, was a popular one, and it was adopted in bits and pieces by many early Christians who believed in Jesus Christ in some form or another.

You can see how seductive many of these doctrines were (everyone wants to believe they have "secret knowledge" ...). And it's certainly not surprising that so many corruptions and false interpretations should have gathered and festered amidst the excitement of this new religion - the Good News of Jesus Christ (imagine how much worse it would have been if the internet had existed!). But if this young church was going to prosper and grow, if it was going to "make disciples of all nations", as Jesus had commissioned it, then it had to decide what was the true faith, the right doctrine, the real beliefs of Christianity. What it needed was a Creed.

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At Nicaea, in 325, the church did what Constantine and most of its leaders wanted. It resoundingly rejected Arianism and Gnosticism (and all the -isms) and it propounded a doctrine called *homoousios* (a Greek word that was used to express the oneness of the Father and the Son). So Jesus *was* divine, and he *was* coeternal, coequal and consubstantial with the Father. What's more, in its determination to make all this official, the Council wrapped the idea of the Father and the Son being "one in being" into a Creed - the Nicene Creed - which it said all Christians should say when they worshipped, and should affirm at baptisms.

But the Nicene Creed goes a lot further than that, doesn't it? What we say each Sunday is not just that God the Father and the Son are one, but that the Holy Spirit is right up there with them, *and of them and part of*

them. We say we believe "in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he [the Holy Spirit] is worshiped and glorified".

In other words, the Creed, as we say it, clearly expresses the Holy Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all equal. But the folks at Nicaea in 325 didn't get that far. They cracked the problem of the Son (they acknowledged his divinity alongside God, that he was "from the essence of God"), and they went on to devote an entire paragraph to the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, that paragraph consisted of only five words - "And in the Holy Spirit" (as in "And we believe in the Holy Spirit"). That's all! They made no attempt to define or explain the Holy Spirit.

That omission was fairly quickly (and apparently fairly quietly) put right. At the next council, in Constantinople in 381 (that's 56 years later), the creed that was promulgated was still called the Nicene Creed, because it was clearly based on what had been agreed at Nicaea, but it had some very important additions. And to judge from the way in which it was presented at Constantinople, without fanfare or debate, this new version had been in use for a good many years, probably since soon after Nicaea.

In particular, the Council of Constantinople added three things:

- an explicit statement of the Father's generation of the Son 'before all ages' (in other words, the Son was part of the plan from the beginning, not just a hurried piece of patching later on),
- a mention of the Virgin Mary, who hadn't made it at all into the original version, neither as Mother of God nor as the *Virgin* Mary. She was there now,
- and, of course, a full article on the Holy Spirit, describing Him as "the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, and Who spoke through the prophets". There's the clear and emphatic statement of the Trinity.

But this still wasn't good enough! Yes, it stated the pivotal existence of the Holy Trinity - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Three-in-One, the Triune God. But in describing the Holy Spirit specifically, it says that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father" - not from the Father and the Son, just from the Father. So here was another "woops" moment, but this one

was actually about language and translation rather than about substance - and it was rather a remarkable one because the original version of the Creed, in Greek, got it wrong, whereas the translation (into Latin) got it right. The original version in Greek said "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father". But the Latin translation added a single word - "Filioque", which is the Latin word for "and from the Son" - so it said "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son". And that is the version (the "Filioque version") that eventually came down to us and got incorporated in the Book of Common Prayer.

These differences over words and translation often seem very pedantic, but they're not. The fact that Jesus is the Son of God and is divine, and the fact that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (thus making the Holy Trinity complete and assuring us that the Holy Spirit, alive in this world, is God and Jesus in a different form) ... these are really very fundamental articles of our religion. So it was as well to have them thoroughly debated, written down, and authenticated.

One other peculiarity of the original Nicene Creed did not past muster, and was mercifully deleted at Constantinople. The original Nicene Creed had included a final paragraph which was an anathema. It anathematized (or cursed) anyone who did not believe all these things it itemized. In short, it threatened them with Hell and Damnation. Well, that, too, was dropped at Constantinople - so you're all right!

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I've been talking about the Nicene Creed - the one we call the Nicene Creed, even though it's really the Constantinople Creed. But (as I've already indicated) it probably wasn't the first statement of belief to be developed in the Christian Church. That honor rightly belongs, we surmise, to the Symbol of Faith that I spoke about a few minutes ago - the response to the introduction of "baptismal interrogations" in about 150 A.D. We can't be certain when it became The Apostles Creed that we know today. It could have happened before or after the writing of the Nicene Creed. But it was certainly "on the drawing board" before Nicaea, and it has certainly endured every bit as long as the Nicene version.

There's a legend about The Apostles' Creed which says that, at the first Pentecost, each of the 12 apostles contributed one clause, one idea. I rather doubt that, but there's no doubt in my mind that the Apostles' Creed is, to this day, the briefest, simplest, most majestic rendering of essential Christian doctrine.

It doesn't go into matters of substance. It's basically a list of things we believe. A lot more is implied but not stated (the Holy Trinity, for instance, can be implied from it, but there's no actual mention of it). But brevity often produces a wonderful elegance, and that is the case here. It begins by describing God the Father - "I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth". That's all - perfect! In the next sentence it defines the Son at greater length (a much more complicated phenomenon) - "And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended to hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, thence he will come to judge the living and the dead". And finally, there's a sentence of what you might call "two- or three-words". It doesn't waste a lot of time on the Holy Spirit (which it's already credited with conceiving Jesus Christ in Mary's body), so it goes straight into the list of essential "other beliefs", after the Father and the Son: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting".

That's it. So brief. So elegant. It doesn't address the great Christological issues defined in the Nicene Creed - it says nothing explicitly about the divinity of either Jesus or the Holy Spirit - which is perhaps why it's been acceptable to all manner of Christians ever since, including both Arians and Unitarians. Today, it's widely used in Churches of the Western tradition, including the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, Lutheranism, Anglicanism, Western Orthodoxy, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists.

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The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed - these are the two that have survived into our current liturgies. But the original Prayer Book of the

Anglican Church (Cranmer's Prayer Book) included another one, the Athanasian Creed. It's sometimes known by its opening words in Latin, "Quicumque vult" - Whoever wishes [to be saved].

It's considerably longer than the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and it doesn't look like something you would say together in church. It's not an "I believe/We believe" thing. It's really a series of doctrinal statements about the Trinity and the Incarnation, the two seminal doctrines of the Christian religion. [And it bears the name of Athanasius - apparently the same Athanasius who, as a young deacon from Alexandria, led the charge against Arianism at the Council of Nicaea in 325. But no one knows why it bears his name since Athanasius had been dead at least a hundred years when it was produced. Maybe the writer dedicated it to his memory? It seems to have originated in southern Gaul about 460-470. Its importance lies simply in the fact that, along with the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds, it survived in many western prayer books until fairly recently.] Nowadays, it's pretty well disappeared - though it is still printed at the very back of the Book of Common Prayer, in very small type (p. 864).

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So there you have it. Two creeds (let's forget Athanasius for the time being) ... two creeds of great richness and subtlety. But do they do the job? When we stand up here together each week and bleat them like sheep, do they have any real meaning for us?

I don't want to decry them as statements of doctrine. Maybe they're useful at baptisms and confirmations and ordinations (I'm sure they are) - the Nicene Creed, at least. But do they do anything for us on Sunday mornings? Do they describe the religion we think we believe in?

They're all about doctrine - often very complicated doctrines. But what about the reality of leading a Christian life ... what do they tell us about that? I've already mentioned Love as a missing element ... but how about some of the practicalities of being a Christian: couldn't they be incorporated, too? - the sort of things that were central to Jesus' teaching? "Love your neighbor" : humility : compassion : mercy : forgiveness : prayer : peace ... the list goes on.

John Henry Newman, a great hero of mine, wrote his own personal creed, and I've loved it ever since I first heard it as a boy. It comes from his poem "The Dream of Gerontius" - the one Elgar later set as an oratorio - and it's what I leave you with this morning:

*Firmly I believe and truly
God is Three, and God is One;*

*And I next acknowledge duly
Manhood taken by the Son.
And I trust and hope most fully
In that Manhood crucified;
And each thought and deed unruly
Do to death, as He has died.*

*Simply to His grace and wholly
Light and life and strength belong,
And I love, supremely, solely,
Him the holy, Him the strong.*

*And I hold in veneration,
For the love of Him alone,
Holy Church, as His creation,
And her teachings, as His own.*

*And I take with joy whatever
Now besets me, pain or fear,
And with a strong will I sever
All the ties which bind me here.*

*Adoration aye be given,
With and through the angelic host,
To the God of earth and heaven,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*