

Sunday - 10th June 2018 - 9.15 am – The Apostles' Creed – 'I believe'

' . . . holy catholic church . . . and the communion of saints . . . '

1 Peter 2. 9-12

Luke 14. 15 - 24

Through the power of the Holy Spirit may these words become living words and bring us to Christ the living word, Amen.

We took the opportunity on Pentecost Sunday, some four weeks ago now, to think about the statement which comes next in the Apostles Creed after the recital of the life and nature of Jesus Christ which we thought about last week. *'I believe in the Holy Spirit'*. We asked ourselves whether we thought of the Holy Spirit as a person or a proposition and then used the symbols which are often used to represent the Holy Spirit to discover more. We thought of the symbolism of fire, wind, oil, water and a dove emphasising the Spirit's purity, invisibility and indelibility and the power and capacity to regenerate and bring peace. And I finished by saying that: *' . . . when we say 'I believe and trust in the Holy Spirit' what we are saying is that the church believes and trusts in love and the power of communication as being at the very heart of God.'*

And this is what we need to hold in our minds as we consider the next two statements in the Creed.

I believe in the holy catholic church . . . and the communion of saints.

For it is no coincidence that talk of the church and its followers are embedded within the section on belief and trust in the Holy Spirit. That is the context of what we here affirm.

At first we should recognise in saying 'I believe' we are making a chance in the way in which we are using the words. We are not saying we 'believe and trust' in the church as we do Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That could be almost idolatrous believing in something which is, after all, man-made. Instead what we are really expressing is that we are believers **within** the church. That is important because otherwise there is the risk that Christianity can become an entirely private affair. Yes, faith is personal in that each one of us needs to claim faith for ourselves. But it is all experienced within the community of the faithful. We see this at a baptism where it is not only the parents and godparents but the whole church which promises to help bring up the child in faith.

John Wesley, the famous cleric theologian and co-founder of Methodism was strongly against the notion of religion being private, he wrote:

The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.

And that's the basis upon which Methodism was built.

What then do we mean by 'holy'? The one word has two meanings. 'Holy' can be as in so set up apart from the ordinary and so close to God that it means 'sacred' but also in the sense nowadays of something being 'pure or morally perfect'. So, what do we mean when we say that the church is holy? Perhaps that's the hardest line of all to say in the Creed because our experience of and the church's history is only too full of its many and deep imperfections.

One commentator suggests that thinking of what we call the Holy Land might help in this. It is one of the most contested and congested areas of the world where humanity struggles most with who it is. But still calling it the 'Holy Land' comes from it being the place where God chose to come to us most clearly. The same commentator goes on to say:

'Likewise to say that the church is holy is not to claim for it a particular level of moral purity. Yes, we call it holy for the same reasons we call the land holy: This [holy church] is the community of Peter and Mary and James and Mary Magdalene. This is the community in which martyrs have testified with their blood, in which missionaries have gone to distant lands for the sake of their faith, in which devout believers have devoted all their energies to the support and defence of the defenceless. This is the community in which millions upon millions – a multitude that no one could count (Rev 7. 9) have found support in times of grief and faith in times of anguish. This is the community in which my parents surrounded me with love in which my faith grew, in which my faith has been repeatedly tested and strengthened. For all these reasons, just as that land over there is holy, this church over here and everywhere is also holy.'

The church is holy for all these reasons but above all it is holy because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. And as we say it, we are not only affirming a belief but also issuing an appeal or expressing an aspiration that the church should grow in holiness.

If the church is holy, then we come to perhaps the most often misunderstood word of the creed – making reference to the *holy Catholic church*. Many people at first query that they are Protestant rather than Catholic - but Catholic doesn't mean Roman Catholic. Then they use the word to mean universal – that it is the church everywhere.

But we can take it wider than that, because, Catholic – means ‘according to the whole’ So that what makes the church catholic is not that it is everywhere or universal, but that people from all over are part of it and contribute to it. It's not only about geographical spread but about identity. With people from all over, diversity is assured, so the differences within the church are a necessary feature of it. The catholic church embraces a wide variety of believers – and indeed celebrates that. An early church Father Cyril of Jerusalem [c 315-86] expressed it thus:

. . . The church is called catholic because it is spread throughout the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it teaches in its totality and without any omissions every doctrine which ought to be brought to the knowledge of humankind, concerning things both that are seen and unseen, in heaven and on earth. It is also called catholic because it brings into religious obedience every sort of person, rulers and ruled, learned and simple

The church should be a foretaste of what God's kingdom is going to be like and that's why we heard the reading from Luke about the wedding banquet. The invited guests fail to turn up so instead the host welcomes in anyone who was around – no discrimination – the poor, the lame and the blind – all were welcome. These people who were usually outcasts became honoured guests at the centre of things. And that's what being part of the holy catholic church is about – all are welcome.

So we then move on to ‘*the Communion of Saints*’.

I wonder what picture comes to your mind when you say that phrase– I see an icon with a host of figures with gold halos all facing the same direction all neatly queuing for . . . I don't know quite what! We would usually think of something like ‘the fellowship of believers’ – not just the really good people but everyone who has lived and died in the faith. But interestingly both words – communion and saints are capable of two meanings and so no one can be quite sure what is the real meaning of the two put together. Rather than that being a problem, as that could be, here it allows a multi-layered understanding which is gloriously Anglican!

‘Communio’ can mean fellowship or sharing. And ‘sanctorum’ can refer to holy people or holy things. Thus the communion of saints can indeed be the fellowship of believers but it can also mean the sharing of holy people or holy things. If it is the former, the sharing amongst holy people, that could be about the holding of goods in common. In the first chapters of Acts we read how the Early church were prepared to share their personal wealth with all believers. By the time of the late inclusion of this line into the Creed such generosity of living was largely reserved in practice to the monasteries. Perhaps it was the monks were trying to re-awaken the practice of sharing and shedding possessions for the benefit of all. Or it could be referring to the act of the sharing of holy things which suggests the giving and receiving of Holy Communion. If we take the multi-layered approach then when we say this line in the Creed, we are identifying with, firstly the fellowship of believers of all times and places, secondly our readiness to share with others who are in need and finally our sharing of ‘holy things’ which belong to us all. And it is our sharing that makes us a fellowship – a common faith, common baptism, the one bread of Communion.

When talking about the Holy Spirit some weeks back, I suggested that *‘the Holy Spirit acts to make God’s love real to us and draws us into a relationship with the Father and the Son, through baptism and at confirmation, through the bread and wine of Communion and through our relationships one with another.’* We become one body, declaring ourselves ready to share with others in that fellowship. And in that we become holy and set apart and so does the church. It is the sharing of experience and most especially the giving and receiving of love which makes this happen, a holy sharing of holy people and holy things all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So again we might see these two lines of the Creed as being aspirational. They confirm our holiness through the Spirit and commit us to greater holiness through our own actions. To that extent they operate like parts of the Lord’s Prayer. We can also think of the whole Creed as both guard and guide. It is ‘guard’ to the extent that it was written to guard against wrong thinking and ‘guide’ to the extent that it encourages the church to greater fellowship and holiness.

So with just one week of this sermon series to go we have just the last three lines to consider. Obviously this sermon series hasn’t provided the final word on the truths which we state every week in the Creed. However I hope what it may be encouraging us to do, is to say the Creed with more awareness, especially of the reason why it emphasises certain truths. It

also may have freed things up for us in the sense of being reminded that the Creed is affirming the belief of the whole church rather than a personal affirmation of faith, despite its language in the first person singular. It has hopefully also brought an awareness of the context in which the Creed originated and the purpose which it set out to fulfil. Of course I pointed out last week that the Creed doesn't mention the 'I' word – the love of God and perhaps to that extent we may find it wanting these days, in an era when faith is expressed very clearly in terms of love - for God, for creation and for one another.

But there is something timeless about the Creed which roots us in our faith and gives us continuity across the centuries. As we have begun to look beneath the surface of the words, just a little, we have uncovered a wealth of meaning and understanding to enrich our habitual repetition of the words Sunday by Sunday. And for that let us give thanks to God. Amen