

8. I believe in ... the Holy Catholic Church

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 27 November 2022, 1st Sunday in Advent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 133; Ephesians 4:1-16; Mark 10:17-31

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

When I was a teenager the number 1 show on TV was *Friends*. You might remember the theme song from the show:

I'll be there for you
 (When the rain starts to pour)
 I'll be there for you
 (Like I've been there before)
 I'll be there for you
 ('Cause you're there for me too)

That's something we all want isn't it. People who will always be there for us, and who we can be there for. *Friends*. One of the great costs of the pandemic has been the loneliness and isolation that lockdowns and working from home online have brought about. One uni student told me a few weeks ago that she had done 3 years of her degree but had made no friends because it had all been online. We're not made to be alone. We're made for community. But there's a catch. Community requires commitment. We want someone to be there for us, but we need to be there for them too. And that means saying no to keeping our relationship options open, and saying yes to particular relationships. Not to exclude hypothetical people, but to invest in actual people. Relationship means curtailing our freedom so we can be there for someone else. And letting that freedom go is something we find very difficult to do.

We've been working our way through the Apostles Creed. It's an ancient summary of the Christian faith. Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples by baptising people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything he had commanded. The Apostles Creed developed out of the baptism liturgy, outlining what it means to believe in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The third part of the creed focuses on the Holy Spirit but you'll notice that most of it actually is about our experience. That is because the Spirit is God at work in us. Our experience of life as a Christian is life in the Spirit. Today we're looking at the phrases - "I believe in ... the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints." The invitation to experience the life of God by the Spirit, is at one and the same time an invitation to the life of the Church.

What does it mean to believe *in* the Church? Unlike God, who we cannot see, we can see the Church, which ironically presents us with a problem. The Church so often disappoints, to put it mildly. We

can see all its flaws, which may make it hard to believe in the Church, and indeed, God himself. Maybe that's your experience. And yet Christians say we believe in the Church. So what does that mean? Let's explore the answer by way of the three descriptions in the Apostle's Creed - Holy, Catholic and the Communion of Saints. These words seem at once far from our experience and yet speak of the deepest reality of the Church.

Holy

How can we believe that the Church is holy when it so obviously not holy? On a public level we're known for gross institutional failure, self-righteousness, and "bigotry". Maybe you or those you love have been wounded by the church. Anyone who has been here at St George's for any length of time will know we're not perfect. The reason the vicar of Dibley was so funny is because we were laughing at ourselves. Come to church expecting a utopian society and you will be swiftly disappointed. But actually isn't that the point? The church is not a palace for saints. It's a hospital for sinners. The holiness of the church is not a holiness that cannot be touched by sin. It's the holiness of Jesus who ate with sinners. Who did not stay at a distance but mixed with us, in all our mess, to heal our wounds, to cleanse our impurities, to make us holy. That is because God's true holiness is his love.

One of the pictures of the Church in the New Testament is the Bride of Christ. In Ephesians 5 we read that:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her **26** to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, **27** and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

This is why the Church is holy. Not because of anything in her. But because of Christ's gift. Because Christ has made her holy through his blood shed for her on the cross. He is in the business of bringing beauty from brokenness, transforming each of us so that we more and more inhabit the holiness which he has bestowed upon us.

And this is marvellous news for you and I. Because it means we don't have to become perfect people in order to come to church. We come as we are, with all our mess, because God loves us as we are. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are, and so is in the business of doing that gentle work to make us holy, to make us like Jesus. He does that through the church. The holiness of the church begins with its forbearance to me, welcoming me as a sinner, and it leads to my bearing up of others. Because to be a Christian is, "to accept the impossibility of autonomy and the weakness of my own resources."¹

The word Holy does mean set apart, distinct, different. And this is what the church is to be. We are God's people, chosen, set apart, called to reflect his light and life in a world of darkness and death. We are saints. That's what being holy is. Oh yes, some of us might be more saintly than others, but everyone in Christ is a saint. But that holiness always begins and ends with grace. God's gracious

¹ Pope Benedict, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius 2004: 343

welcome of us, and our gracious welcome of others. The church is a community of spiritual and moral formation. It is the place where God is making a new humanity, taking the pieces of fragmented humanity and fashioning them into a community that embodies the life and love of his Son. There is always a dance. Seeking to live the life of the Spirit. And at the same time knowing that we only stand by grace, and we grow by grace, so there can be no sense of superiority or self-righteousness.

Maybe you come today burdened and crushed. You might think, how could God possibly love me? Are you part of the church? Hear God's word to you today. Christ has made you holy, washed you clean. Maybe you're comfortable, resting on your laurels. Hear God's word - you're part of God's holy church. He has more for you. He wants you to grow in holiness to be more like Jesus. Where do you need to grow? What is your plan for growth? Who in the church do you need to let help you in that so they can be God's agent of grace to you?

Catholic

The second description of the church is that it is Catholic. When we hear this, most of us think Roman Catholic. But the word simply means "universal".

Thinking about the opposite of catholic can help clarify things. What would a church that is not catholic look like? Sectarian. Fiercely independent. Reluctant to acknowledge other churches as genuine. Taking pride in how they have the right doctrine or worship style and how all the other churches have it wrong. Unwilling to work with other churches who disagree for fear of being tainted.

By contrast a church that is 'catholic' will be relaxed and cheerful. They will acknowledge that they are part of the one big body of Christ throughout the world and throughout history, across languages and cultures. They will recognise that what unites us is infinitely bigger than what divides us. This is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 4.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The Church is catholic, universal, because it is mysteriously united in one Spirit, under one Lord. In Christ the barrier between us and God and us and each other has been torn down. In the waters of baptism all the previous social divisions are made irrelevant. The church is universal because it is a microcosm of the whole of humanity. It is made up of people from every corner of the globe, every nation, every ethnicity, rich and poor, educated, illiterate, extroverts and introverts, male and female, Jew and gentile, slave and free. The message of the church is universal. There is no social barrier that would exclude a person from inclusion in this body. The boundaries of the church are as wide as the human race.

Human beings have always struggled to hold together unity and diversity, equality and difference. We see debates about this play out in politics and social media, in sporting clubs and families. The church is the place where God is at work to bring unity in diversity. Our differences are valued because we are all members of the body of Christ and each part is necessary. And at the same time there is unity across difference because we all belong to Christ. He is what unites us. That is not to say we get it right all the time in the church. We are always works in progress. Paul wouldn't urge us to *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,*² if we didn't have to work on this. But God has given the church the spiritual and moral resources of his Word, the Bible, and the power of his Holy Spirit to work out that unity and diversity in flesh and blood communities and together across the globe. So we work on relationships and cooperation across churches in Hobart and across denominations. We work first and foremost on that unity in diversity amongst us here at St George's.

The Church is the most diverse and inclusive institution on earth and it has been that way right from the start. Growing up as a missionary kid, I have had the very great privilege of seeing the unity in diversity of the church. I've been to church in PNG, the Solomon Islands, Peru, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Nepal, Cambodia, Israel and New Zealand. Things looked different in every country. Different languages. Different music. Different styles. But in each place I found a profound spiritual bond as we met together under one Lord Jesus in the unity of the Holy Spirit. And that brings us to the Communion of Saints.

Communion

The word for communion in Greek is *koinonia*. It could also be translated as partnership, sharing in, or fellowship. It's where we get the words community and communication from. *Koinonia* / communion pops up all over the New Testament. The basic idea is this. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are brought into communion with Christ, we share in Christ, we participate in Christ. And as we share in Christ, so we share in each other. This is where the picture of the Church as the body of Christ comes in. Through baptism by faith we are made members of the body of Christ. All parts of the body are needed. No part can say to another, "I don't need you". If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part rejoices, every part rejoices with it.³ In Christ we meet and have each other for eternity.

Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, is a sign and symbol of that spiritual communion we share in Christ. We share in his body and blood, so we share in Christ and we share together. Just as sin is a barrier between us and between us and God, so we have a time for confession and repentance in each service, and especially before Holy Communion, because it is a moment of honesty before God and each other. Confession addresses our problem rather than hiding it and so hiding from God and each other. So also we are all invited to receive the tokens of God's grace and full and free forgiveness at the Lord's table.

² Ephesians 4.3

³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12

Traditionally, churches were surrounded by graves. This was a physical expression of the belief in the communion of saints. Yes, death separates the living from the dead. But the deeper spiritual reality is that all who share in Christ, living and dead, are alive in Christ.

And physicality is important. Communion is best experienced when it is embodied, not in abstract, theoretical terms. This is why the church is both universal and also necessarily local. Communion must be expressed and lived out with real people in flesh and blood relationships, as we meet together for Word and Prayer, Sacrament and Singing, with sisters and brothers in Christ. The communion of saints means real community. Morning Tea, Bible Study groups, gardening bees - these are all opportunities for us to build community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer." "Not all Christians receive this blessing. ... The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God."⁴ One of my favourite scenes from the Lord of the Rings is where Frodo and Sam are on the slopes of Mt Doom. Frodo is so crushed by the burden of the ring that he can no longer walk. Sam says to him, "Come on Mr Frodo. I can't carry it for you. But I can carry you." We all bear our own burdens. But at times we need others to carry us and to be there to carry others. That's church.

We began with our human need for friendship. We all need to belong, to be part of a community, where others are there for us and we're there for them. I love the holy catholic church, the communion of saints precisely because in these things God is at work to meet the longings of our hearts. In a society full of loneliness and isolation, church is just what our neighbours need. It's where we learn to love God and love each other so we can be sent out to love our neighbours. My hope for St George's is that we would be a place of deep and rich community, where we find friendship and hospitality, a home and a family; Where we celebrate our differences even as are united in Jesus; Where we bear each other's burdens, where we let others in to share our lives; Where we're accountable to each other because we care enough to catch our sisters and brothers when they fall and we want them to grow in godliness. So keep showing up! Be there for others, as they are there for you too. Let go some of your freedom for this community and find that you meet Christ in the face of his body, the Church.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, HarperOne, 1954:18-20