

One holy, catholic and apostolic church

We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church...

We've got to the summary section of the creed. This bit wasn't in the original text from Nicaea. It comes from a later council at Constantinople in 381. It's all the creed says about the church, but there's plenty to think about in that one short sentence. We're going to go one word at a time...

But we'll start with the last word... with Church

This week, I have been reading *Conclave*, the Robert Harris novel about choosing a new pope... you may have read the book or seen the film... it has some interesting reflections on what the church is that apply to the whole body of Christ as much as to the novel's setting, the Roman Catholic church ...

At the mass just before the cardinals are shut in to make their decision, the cardinal who's managing the process (that's Ralph Fiennes in the film) goes off-piste in his sermon, preaching on the text we heard today from the letter to the Ephesians, which talks about the Church as a body with Christ as its head...

And he says this: *I take this idea of the body and the head to be a beautiful metaphor for collective wisdom: of a religious community working together to grow into Christ. To work together, and grow together, we must be tolerant, because all of the body's limbs are needed. No one person or faction should seek to dominate another.*

Clearly words designed to encourage a divided, disparate group of individuals to focus on the task in hand...

There are lots of other pictures we often use for the church... family, community, temple, household, bride... But body is so powerful... it gives us ideas about unity, but also about diversity, it gives us ideas about common purpose and a multiplicity of ways of contributing to the fulfilment of that purpose, of a living organism rather than an organisation... an organism that is growing into its true identity... attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, as the writer to the Ephesians puts it. We are not there yet... nothing like it... but we are on the way...

Let's go back to the beginning and look at those 4 descriptors of church, characteristics of the body of Christ... one, holy, catholic, apostolic.... Words that define a little more what the church is growing into... the way we should be going...

Firstly, one – because God is one... we are one body... reflecting the character of the one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all, to quote the letter to the Ephesians.

The multiplicity of churches is less obvious in the UK, but if you travel down a street in the USA, you might see First Baptist Church of (pick a city), second Baptist church of sometimes even third or fourth.... This also applies to other denominations... there's a Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

From the very beginning churches have split up... sometimes because communities grew... sometimes because they disagreed... sometimes because the king wanted a divorce... but for all our differences, we still have so much in common...more than that which divides us ... We have a shared text in the Bible... shared rites of baptism and eucharist... a shared focus in worship...albeit that we all do these in very different ways...but above all we have a shared spirit... There is one body and one Spirit, the writer to the Ephesians says.

Next up: Holy

You may have heard about the poem that a priest, leaving a church, wrote as a parting shot to the congregation...in a quiet news week in July it went a bit viral ...

What makes people not come to church? he wrote...

Could it be the people who already go?

*The righteous, the clique, the worthy,
the disdainful look given, the thought you're in my seat
the unfriendly, so that the stranger remains so.*

It's easy to slip into making holy mean *holier than thou*, as the poem implies... easy to be someone who judges others... easy to be a hypocrite...

Until we remember this truth: that we are a community of forgiven sinners, only holy because of what Jesus has done for us... The writer to the Christians at Ephesus knows this: they encourage their readers to live in a way that is characterised by all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

When the church *is* holy, it's when it stands up for people who are most vulnerable, stands up against injustice and oppression. And, as with each of these four marks of the church, holiness is what we're travelling towards, a promise of God, rather than an achievement of humans. We are not there yet: there are still sinful individual Christians and sinfulness in Churches (the Church of England's poor record on safeguarding comes to mind here). But we travel on, hopefully, humbly, trusting God's promises.

Third one: Catholic

Let's go back to Conclave... *How can a church be considered universal if it speaks 50 different languages?* one cardinal exclaims, arguing that the Roman Catholic church should revert to Latin... That's what *catholic* means in the creed... universal, worldwide... So the church is present in all parts of the world, through all time (well, since the beginning of the first century, anyway).

When the word is used in the amended Nicene creed, Christianity hadn't exactly spread into the whole world, but it had spread across the Mediterranean world, which was the bit that counted to the Emperor and members of the council who formulated the text!

When we stand to say the creed, as we will do in a few minutes, we are connected to all Christians, in all places, in all times... catholicity is a kind of unity. An intentional connectedness, an inclusiveness that is not undermined by difference, whether that is linguistic or cultural or theological.

Lastly: Apostolic

Apostle is the term sometimes used in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament for Jesus' 12 disciples. It's also used for other key missionary leaders, like Barnabas. While a disciple is a learner, an apostle is one who is sent out. Sent to share the good news ... sent to perform acts of healing and restoration. When we talk about the church being apostolic, I think we're talking about two key ideas. Firstly, that we are rooted in a passed-on tradition, a story that reaches right back in some way to those first 12 people Jesus called. A tradition and story that is faithful to its origins... Secondly, that we are, like those original dozen people, called out of the world, out of our ordinary lives to learn Christ and then sent back into the world to work with God for God's kingdom.

So there we are... one holy catholic and apostolic church... that's what we belong to. That's our identity and our calling... who we are and who we will, by God's grace, become. I'd like to end with a quotation from Martin Luther... part of his kickback to criticism of his 41 theses (the ones that were or were not nailed to a door in Wittenburg)

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet

finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

At the end of the sermon, as we reflected on what it means to be God's church, we listened to a setting of Psalm 133 by Michael John Trotta, *Behold how good*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVj7X2Qk-Ek>