

I believe in one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church
2 Thessalonians 2: 13-17 and Psalm 133

The apostles creed which we have been focussing on through this series simplifies this week's subject line to 'I believe in the holy catholic church' but I think its worth taking the slightly longer version into consideration as we look what we believe about the church.

I will look at the words one, holy, catholic, apostolic and church as we work out what this phrase means in full, some in more detail than others.

When we say the church is one, you only need to take a relatively short walk along most high streets to see that the church is clearly not one, it comes in a huge range of varieties. From the very beginning people have wanted to add things to or take things from the message they receive. Paul is warning about this in our reading from Thessalonians.

Fast forward 300 years and the Roman Emperor Constantine brings together all the church leaders in the Roman world to sort things out and agree on what the Christian church believed, a meeting called the Council of Nicea which gave its name to the creed we will say later. It solved the problem for a bit.

In 664 there was a Council at Whitby in Yorkshire to decide whether Christians in this country should follow Roman or Celtic traditions some people know this for making a decision about how we work out the date of Easter but it looked at other differences between the churches too such as whether monks should have tonsures – the shaved head favoured by Rome -or long hair favoured by the Celtic church.

By 1054 things were so bad that what is known as the Great Schism happened and the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches parted ways in a dispute about the authority of the pope and whether the Holy Spirit came from the Father or from the Father and the Son.

In 1534 under Henry VIII the Church of England was founded, separating us from the Roman Catholic church.

Since then we have seen the Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, Pentecostal and many other churches start, so how are we one?

In most of these churches you will find a statement of faith that's not very different from the creeds we are looking at – we worship the same God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that is what makes us one. We are family, we share the same Father. Like human siblings, different churches will often argue bitterly, but they remain part of the family and if you look closely you can see a family likeness.

With our history lesson over for the evening we move on, to being holy – being dedicated to God. Frederick Buechner says **'Only God is holy, just as only people are human. God's holiness is his Goodness. To speak of anything else as holy is to say that it has something of God's mark upon it.'** That mark on the church, of being dedicated to God, is what should give away the family connection between churches.

Moving swiftly along we come to catholic - probably the word in the creeds that gives most people a problem when they first come across it in the Church of England. But this is the root meaning of the word catholic, not shorthand for Roman Catholic, and that meaning is 'universal', something for everyone. William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury at the end of the second world war said **"The Church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members."** Our church should never be something that we keep to ourselves, we aspire to be an inclusive church and should continually be looking for ways to invite others who are not yet part of any church to join us.

We come now to apostolic, most of us have heard about the apostles in the new testament, but why talk about them now? Is it as Andrew Lloyd Webber suggested in Jesus Christ Superstar just because they wrote the gospels?

Always hoped that I'd be an Apostle

Knew that I would make it if I tried

Then when we retire we can write the Gospels

So they'll still talk about us when we've died

That's not why the church is described as Apostolic, the term means that we can trace a line, albeit in places a wobbly one, from our priests - Lynda and Ian and Gareth- to the bishops who ordained them, and from those bishops to earlier bishops back through history to those original apostles. Going back to where we started with division between churches, apostolic succession is one of the things that many churches agree on. In the 1990s a declaration that explicitly included recognition of apostolic succession led to the creation of the Porvoo Communion bringing the Church of England back into communion with the Lutheran Nordic and Baltic churches for the first time since the 1500s when these churches all split from the Roman Catholic church.

The final word in our sentence today is church, over recent months we have all had to develop our understanding that the church is a group of believers meeting together independent of our buildings. As we begin to go back to meeting in our buildings, I pray that we won't lose the sense of being together that has come through meeting online and supporting one another with crackly connections or learning how to see everyone on zoom.

I hope that whatever happens in future you will develop your belief in a church that is one - because we believe in one God, holy - because our church has God's mark on it, catholic - because we welcome everyone, and apostolic - because we can trace a line back through history to Jesus' first followers.