

'I Believe' – A Homily on the Apostle's Creed

*I believe in God,
the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.*

As establishment, Church of England Christians, we can feel pretty safe when we recite the Creed, so safe, perhaps, that we've never really taken the time to think through what it actually says or means. The astute among you will notice that the vicar has transposed our Creed during the Sundays in Lent into another key. Gone is the expansive Nicene Creed of Ordinary Time, replaced by the sharper Apostle's Creed. More than this, gone is any easy recitation, now you are being questioned and provoked, 'do you believe?', 'where are you in all of this?'

During Lent we are using the Apostle's Creed in its interrogative form precisely to recall that moment of baptism in which we are asked, 'is this your faith?' That moment of decision where we faced the great West door, first to renounce the alliances of our past, the systems and structures that enslaved us, the fear of death that held us enthralled; that moment where we turned eastward towards the rising sun, to the light of Christ making a new world possible, bathing us in new meaning, bestowing upon us a new purpose.

David Bentley Hart has this to say, 'we are far removed from the days when one's baptism could be said to be the most momentous event – and perhaps the most dramatic, terrifying, and joyous experience – of one's life... but for most of the Christians of the earliest centuries... to become a Christian was to renounce a very great deal of what one had known and been to that point, in order to be joined to a new reality... to depart from one world... and to enter another.'

Some might argue that Creeds are created by bishops and councils in order to condition and to control, political documents designed to wield power and dominate communities, but not so with this Creed. The Apostle's Creed was born out of the early

church's activity in baptism, an indigenous form of the ancient church's response to the risen Christ, a 'grassroots confession of faith,' as Ben Myers puts it. It is this Creed – the Apostle's Creed – that we will be exploring together during Lent, both in our Sunday sermons and in our seminar series after mass each week.

So today: *'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.'*

Who is the 'I' or the 'We' that is speaking the Creed? It seems to me that the contemporary Church of England is suffering a catastrophic failure of imagination. Like most 'moderns' it's beginning to believe that the best words are new words, that the things with most depth are the things we make up ourselves. So there is an endless obsession with the new: fresh expressions of church, banal new worship songs, Bishop's Mission Orders, make up your own eucharistic prayer. We are beginning to become subjected to the tyranny of the new. But as our world turns 'post-modern' it is beginning to understand that my words and my creativity cannot sustain the universe, that we cannot generate reality alone. Rather my words are more often than not fleeting expressions of temporary perspectives.

So the 'I' of the Creed, is not only my own, though it is this, but it also belongs to the Church, the community of faith that has lived through millennia, a community of generous tradition and orthodoxy, a community of voices that can enfold and enrich my own. This corporate 'I' is not enslaved to this present moment, but is rather a real storied self: springing from the past, open to the present, hopeful for the future.

'Believe.' What does it mean to believe? If we were to listen to those great Masters of Suspicion, Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, then belief is nothing but an illusion designed to domesticate and pacify, a religious wish fulfilment, a kind of 'pie in the sky when you die.' But what if belief needs to be reconfigured as trust?

If the Church of England is suffering a crisis of the imagination, then it seems our society is suffering from a crisis of trust. The idea of a common public sphere is almost irrevocably eroded with only the people who shout the loudest being heard. 'To Brexit or Not to Brexit' is only the newest, and perhaps most tragic, instance of this lack of trust. It seems

there is no-one to believe in, no one to trust anymore. To put trust at the heart of things, just as our Creed does, is a very counter-cultural thing to do, but it re-affirms what we already know: that to function as human beings at all is to put our trust in things: in our parents, our teachers, our friends and our world. Only by adopting an attitude of trust am I able to live and flourish as a human being. As Augustine says, 'without trust we would be unable to do anything in this life.'

But who is it we are to put our trust in? 'God, the Father, Almighty.' Now this doesn't sound like the most promising start. Feminists have taught us that images of God as Father can be damaging and dangerous, no less so than an understanding of God as a cosmic tyrant who does what he wills and who's power knows no limits. But the early church fathers and mothers remind us that our understanding of God as Father is not analogous to our relationships with fathers or mothers, but only an incorporation into the relationship between the Father and Jesus, in the divine relationship they share together. God as Father and Son speaks of God as always in relationship. God is both eternally generative, begetting the Son, and endlessly receptive, as the begotten Son. This is a subversive and transformative understanding of God as it means that we are most like God both when we are generating love, but also when we are receiving love. God as this kind of love is a God we can trust explicitly. And the almighty power this God shows is, as Augustine says, a 'maternal love, expressing itself as weakness.' Every time we recite the Creed our understand of Fatherhood and power need to be radically questioned and re-thought.

More than this, this endlessly giving and receiving love, this God, is the maker of everything that is. This means that our world is good through and trough and that trust is possible. At the heart of creation isn't a cold absence or a chaotic maelstrom, but is love itself, a love that holds all things in being, that nurtures and sustains, a love that seeks nothing less than the good of all things. As Julian of Norwich tells us at the end of her explorations of suffering and spirituality, 'love was his meaning.' If this doesn't lead us into trust, I don't know what will. AMEN.