

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

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen*

In my first sermon on the Apostles' Creed I quoted from David Bentley Hart who spoke of the drama of baptismal commitment and symbolism, that to say, 'I believe' and to be plunged into the waters was to be 'joined to a new reality, to depart from one world and to enter another.'

We have seen how the Apostles' Creed itself is a recitation of this 'new world,' narrating a tale of an interior divine life – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now revealed in the history of our world, now made available in the life of this one person, Jesus Christ. That in his radical hospitality and welcome, in his death and resurrection, nothing less than the life of God is made known, decisively, demonstrably. Now as we reflect upon the final section of this baptismal Creed, we see how this one life, the life of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is taken up by the fiery energy of the Holy Spirit and universalised, poured out into the whole church, becoming the hope of the cosmos itself.

'I believe in the Holy Spirit.' Sarah Coakley suggests that trying to find adequate images for the Holy Spirit in Western theological art is a bit like playing 'hunt the pigeon.' And it's a bit like that in theology too, we can think about God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ, but sometimes when we turn to the life and the work of the Holy Spirit, we draw something of a blank. What's it for? If we turn back

to the pages of the Old Testament, right back to those first stories of creation in Genesis one and two, we see the Spirit at work. First, the Spirit hovers over the watery chaos as the world begins, a pregnant and brooding power that calls creation into being, that draws form and meaning out of nothingness. And then we encounter the Spirit again at the creation of the first human, Adam. After the mud creature is moulded from the ground, he is breathed into and becomes a living being. Here is the Spirit, in the very breath that animates and sustains us, filling our lungs with purpose and life. And turning to the pages of our gospels, the Spirit is evident again, alighting on Jesus at his baptism, driving him into the wilderness, the power to confront injustice, to heal, to cast out and to forgive, an animating prophetic fire. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe that God is alive and active in our world, that creation happens now, and that Jesus is dynamically present in his church: calling and confronting, blessing and rebuking, healing and restoring.

‘the holy catholic church.’ It is the Spirit that takes the particular life of Jesus and makes it available to everyone. Indeed, it’s the Spirit that makes the church possible, as shown in the Acts of the Apostles and that awesome Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel in which God scattered the language of the people of the world, making a virtue of tribal identity and leaving humanity lost in suspicion and incomprehension. But now, the fiery wind of the Spirit has made communication possible again, diversity can be celebrated as a gift, and we come to recognise that we can only be made whole, only be holy, together. As Ben Myers says, ‘The church is catholic because it is a microcosm of a universal human society,’ and in this society everyone is included and no one is left out, irrespective of race, class, sexuality or gender.

‘the communion of saints.’ You only need to look around our church building

to understand what this means, surrounded as we are by our colourful windows and beautiful carvings. To my right we have all the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Scriptures, living out their stories of faith, courage and failure, on my left, the apostles and saints of the New Testament, baptising and teaching, living out the life of Christ in their community and time. The communion of saints reminds us that our stories are not small and isolated, but are enfolded in the story of the whole church, a church that isn't just located in this time and space, but bursts the boundaries of death itself. To quote Ben again, 'perhaps, at the end of the age, the Total Gospel will be read out and will be found to contain everything – every life, every story, every human grief and joy, all included as episodes in the one great, infinitely rich story of Jesus and his friends. The world itself is too small for such a book. Life and death are too small for the communion of saints.'

'the forgiveness of sins.' It seems funny that in the Apostles' Creed judgement is spoken about before forgiveness. It's almost like forgiveness is given the final word, that we are being told that the necessities of judgement, of putting ourselves and our world to rights is the penultimate thing that will finally dissolve in an infinity of forgiveness. The shape of the Creed is what a theologian might call eschatological, it leads us into the future, and that future isn't dark or cold, but is filled with forgiveness, release and joy. Each of us here knows what it feels like to forgive and be forgiven, the new life that flows from it, the weight that is lifted, the freedom that ensues. What might it mean to give forgiveness the final word in all our relationships, in all our dealings with others? Perhaps it will look like the coming of God's kingdom.

'the resurrection of the body.' I cannot help but think about the British Artist Stanley Spencer, when I think about the resurrection of the body. You could say he

was obsessed with this theme. And in all his paintings, it is ordinariness and locality that he stresses time and time again. Resurrection happens here and now, in aching and sagging bodies just like ours, in someone gently lending their coat to a stranger or brushing the hair of a friend, or even helping them to scabble out of their graves. We have already seen that the Creed constantly affirms the value of the material world. God is the maker of heaven and earth, and now we affirm the resurrection of the body. This means that the very stuff of our lives matters. We're not just ethereal spirits piloting our bodies like a machine, rather we are our bodies: thinking, doing, making, hugging, walking, loving. And all of this matters. More than this, Christian faith says it matters eternally, that the shape of our lives, my life, your life, can have an eternal resonance, that the things we say and do are shaping us up for eternity.

'Amen.' I want to give the last word to this sermon to my PhD supervisor: 'The whole creed is about God's action, God's agency, God's initiative. Even at the end, when we pronounce the amen, we are drawing not on our own resource but God's. We are participating in the action of Jesus, who looks into the face of God and sees all God's ways and works, and says: "Yes! Amen!" When we say the creed, we echo his mighty and eternal amen with our own small, hopeful voices.'