We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church

The Nicene Creed

These days churches (small ‘c’), seem to be popping up everywhere. More often than not they label themselves as nondenominational, charismatic and fundamentalist and they pop up in community centres, in school halls and in empty supermarkets.

There’s a mega-church in Texas. The founding pastor carried out a survey of a white, middle class neighbourhood to see what people wanted in a church. Then he gave them what they wanted; a 10,000 seat auditorium, a health and fitness centre, a school and a shopping mall. The church members can spend most of their time on the campus and on Easter Day they use a helicopter to scatter the Easter eggs for the church kids. It’s said to be one of the most successful churches in the United States.

This tells us a lot about modern capitalism and its ‘find a need and fill it’ philosophy but we have to look a bit deeper if we want to understand what the one holy catholic and apostolic Church is about.

In the Bible the word for Church is Ekklesia, meaning ‘called out’. That, in turn, is a translation of a Hebrew word meaning, literally, ‘the Nation from Israel called forth from their tents to worship God’ and this idea of calling forth or calling out is important to our understanding of the Church.

The first Church

The story of the Church begins in the Old Testament with the people of Israel who knew themselves to be the Ekklesia; the people who had been called by God to fulfill his purpose in history. The nation of Israel was the Church of Israel.

But Israel proved to be unworthy of God’s calling. We have seen that, by the end of the Old Testament, the true destiny of Israel was left in the hands of a faithful few. They were waiting for the coming of God’s Messiah who would rescue them and restore Israel to its true purpose and destiny. Jesus is God’s Messiah and from the beginning of his ministry he set out to restore the Ekklesia of Israel.

The restored Church

It is significant that Jesus chose twelve Apostles - paralleling the twelve founding tribes of Israel - to live and work in a special relationship with himself. It is also significant that the Twelve did not volunteer for service. They were chosen and called out by Jesus. He trained them for leadership and, when they began to glimpse the meaning of his mission, he revealed to them that they - and in particular Peter - would be the rock on which he would build his renewed Ekklesia (see Matthew 16:18).

Jesus gave them Baptism as the sign of entry into his Church and he gave them Holy Communion as the common meal of its members.

Then he went further still. In Saint John’s Gospel Jesus says, ‘I am the true vine’; the vine being a symbol for Israel, the first Ekklesia of God. Jesus says that he is the true Ekklesia, then goes on to say, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.’ (John 15:5) Jesus was saying, ‘To belong to my Church is to share in my life and my being’.

We can’t pretend that this is an easy idea to understand. But it is an important idea. Saint Paul hammers it home again and again by speaking of the Church as ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 12:27), as ‘one body in Christ’ (Romans 12:5), and of Christ as ‘the head of the Church, his body’ (Ephesians 4:15). He too was saying that to belong to the Church is to share the life and being of Jesus.

Which would seem to suggest that the Church is no ordinary society. It is the Ekklesia of those who have been called out by the Word of God to live their lives under his rule; a community where Christ is made present to his people.
Why the Church exists

God’s saving act in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is intended to benefit all men and women, not just a chosen few. And therein lies the meaning and purpose of the Church. God calls us out and calls us together to be a here-and-now sign of what he is up to in the world, and to continue the work of Jesus. How do we do that?

Firstly, we set the style of the Kingdom in our worship by setting God in his place as Lord of all creation and by obeying the command of Jesus to dine at his table.

Secondly, we preach Christ to the world. We continue to proclaim that the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to preach good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (see Luke 4:18-19)

And thirdly, we carry our talk into action by ensuring that God’s love, God’s justice and God’s mercy towards all people, becomes an active reality in God’s world.

The scandal of the Church

It’s hardly necessary to point out that the Church does not always live up to this calling. Our proclamation is half-hearted and coloured by sectarian interests. Our concern to see justice and mercy done in the world is easily forgotten when our comfort is threatened. And all too often our worship of God becomes little more than pious entertainment, easter eggs and helicopters.

But despite our failings, the Lord of the Church still manages to leave his mark upon us.

The marks of the Church

The Nicene Creed says that the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. That would seem to be an arrogant - or at best naive - claim, until we remember that the Church owes its identity not to the men and women who make up its body, but to Jesus its head and its heart.

The Church is one because Christ is one and the Church shares his one life. This does not ignore the fact that the Church is divided among many different denominations. Rather, it affirms the truth that the Church’s essential unity is Christ himself.

The Church is holy not because the people of the Church live lives of outstanding moral excellence, but because Christ is holy and his Holy Spirit possesses the Church.

The Church is catholic - or universal - because Christ is the truth for all times, in all places and for all people.

And the Church is apostolic because it proclaims the apostolic gospel, holds to the apostolic creeds and scriptures, is governed by apostolic authority and is renewed and fed by the apostolic sacraments.

It is the same Church that was called forth by God, restored by Christ and handed on by the apostles.

The Church in history


Saint Luke draws us a picture of the restored Church as it spreads the Gospel from Jerusalem (Acts, Chapters 1 to 6), to Judaea and Samaria (Chapters 6 to 9), to Antioch (Chapters 9 to 12), to Asia Minor (Chapters 12 to 16), to Europe (Chapters 16 to 28), and finally to Rome, the capital of the known world.

In 125 CE, Aristides, a Greek observer, was able to write about the young Christian Church: ‘They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them and they love one another. They despise not the widow and grieve not the orphan. He that hath, distributeth liberally to him that hath not. If they see a stranger they bring him unto their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother; for they call themselves brethren, not after the flesh, but after the spirit and in God; but when one of their poor passes away from the world, and any one of them see him, then he provides for his burial according to his ability; and if they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or oppressed for the name of their Messiah, all of them provide for his needs, and if it is possible that he may be delivered, they deliver him. And if there is among them any man who is poor and needy, and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with their necessary food.’

By 400 CE the Church had survived persecution and had organised itself, defined its faith and published its own scriptures. As well, it had gained a measure of respectability with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and, under the protection of Constantine’s Holy Roman Empire, its missionaries had spread the Gospel all over the known world.

Think about it

I believe in the Church, One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church; and nowhere does it exist.

- Archbishop William Temple

Copyright © The Reverend Graeme A Brady 2016