

Parish of Finchampstead and California



We believe ...

In July and August 2014 all our Sunday services focused on the basics of Christian belief, as set out in the traditional creeds of the church. (Creed comes from the latin *credo* – I believe.) We used the Nicene Creed which has its roots in a church council 1600 years ago (more on the history below).

Each Sunday there were special Bible Readings and a handout with further background and questions to encourage thinking about the ideas. All the readings and handouts are in this overall summary.

History of the Nicene Creed

A great Council of the whole Christian Church was called by the Roman Emperor Constantine at Nicaea (now Iznik in Turkey) in 325. Its main aim was to outlaw the heretical views of Arius. What we now know as the Nicene creed has its roots in the statement of belief issued by the Council but it was not until later Councils (Constantinople 381 and Chalcedon 451) that it took the final form we now use.

1: We believe ...in God the Father

**We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.**

Genesis 1:1-10 & 1:31-2:2

In this first extract from Genesis 1 we hear how God started his creative process.

1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, 'Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.'

⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ...

God continues to create – plants, fish, birds, animals and human beings – and concludes.

³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And

on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

Psalm 19:1-6

Romans 8:18-25

Paul describes how the whole of God's creation waits expectantly.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus describes how God's creative bounty should be enough for us.

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air;

they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown

into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Questions

1 Jesus told his followers to pray, "Our Father ..."; in what ways do we think of God like that; and to what extent does this affect our response to the other ways he's described – the Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth?

2 How literally do we take the description of God *making* heaven and earth in seven days? How do we reconcile what the Bible says with what science tells us?

3 What are the things that God made that are *unseen*?

4 In the reading from Romans, Paul talks about *creation being set free from decay*. It seems likely he was writing about the whole world being freed from death at Jesus' imminent return. 2000 years later we are still waiting for that return. What is the hope we might have now? And does it make a difference to have a sense of being *God's children* (Rom 8.21)?

5 How easy do we find it not to worry about food, drink, clothes and medicine (Matt 6.25)? Who are the good and/or bad examples of this attitude? How can we reconcile this approach with our culture's demands for self-reliance?

6 What do you take God's kingdom to be (Matt 6.33)? Is it here now or still to come? And what is God's righteousness? If that means in some sense the attributes of God that are summarised in or implied by the creed, how might we turn them into things we could aspire to?

7 The creed we use at Baptism and Family Services asks this: Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, *the one for whom we exist*? In what ways does that final phrase add new ideas to those in the Nicene creed?

2: We believe ... in God the Son (part 1)

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.**

Proverbs 8:1-11

Proverbs emphasizes the role of the teacher in imparting wisdom and understanding.

8 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; ³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

⁴'To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

⁵O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it.

⁶Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; ⁷for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

⁸All the words of my mouth are righteous: there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.

⁹They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge.

¹⁰Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold;

¹¹for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Psalms 40:4-10

Galatians 4:1-7

Paul explains how, by sending his Son Jesus, God enables us to claim our inheritance.

4 Heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the

owners of all the property; ² but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³ So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Matthew 13:1-9

Jesus uses parables, such as this familiar one of the sower, as an effective way of teaching.

13 Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!'

Much of this section of the creed is about the assertion of Christian doctrine about Jesus, particularly in relation to God the Father. Some of it is there to refute heresies in the early church. Our focus is on the humanity of Jesus. And because we celebrated Education at some of our services, the Gospel reading uses one of the ways in which Jesus connected with other people – by teaching in parables.

Questions

1 Why is it important that Jesus is God's Son? And his *only* Son? And that he is *begotten* not *made*?

2 What does *eternally* begotten mean?

3 How might we put the phrases *God from God, Light from Light* into other words that tell us about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son?

4 If Jesus is *God's Son*, and was *made man*, how can he also be *of one being with the Father*?

5 In the first section of the creed about God the Father we say that he is the *maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen*. What does it mean when today's section adds that *through Jesus all things were made*?

6 Why did Jesus have to come from heaven to earth *for our salvation*, that is to save us? To save us from what?

7 In what ways does Paul's idea of Jesus redeeming us from (buying us out of) slavery to sin and death (*the elemental spirits of the world*) help us to fulfil our destiny as God's *heirs*? – see today's reading from Galatians 4.

8 The role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception is described by God's angelic messenger to Mary at the Annunciation (Luke 1. 26-38) and to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1. 18-23). The virgin birth has been a key element of Christian belief from very early in the life of the church (though Paul, whose letters are the earliest surviving Christian documents, makes no explicit reference to it). How do you react to God's intervention in the normal course of nature in this way, particularly in the light of Jesus' own miraculous powers?

9 Non-Christians often accept Jesus as a great teacher or a good man while denying his divinity (*of one being with the Father*). What is it about his human life and ministry, including the healings, miracles, and teaching, that point towards his unique divinity?

3: We believe ... in God the Son (part 2)

**For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.**

Numbers 21:4-9

This passage from the Exodus story has often been seen as looking forward to the saving event of Jesus' crucifixion.

⁴From Mount Hor the Israelites set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' ⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Psalms 22:22-27

1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Part of Paul's explanation of how the seeming humiliation of the crucifixion of Jesus discloses God's power.

¹⁸The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power

of God. ¹⁹For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Matthew 26:63-66

Jesus has been arrested and is being questioned by the High Priest at a meeting of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin.

⁶³Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' ⁶⁴Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

⁶⁵Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. ⁶⁶What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'

The Gospel accounts of the events leading up to Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trials, condemnation and execution are very detailed. In the same way the church, through its emphasis on Lent and Holy Week, has always encouraged Christians to prepare themselves for the solemn remembrance of Good Friday. So it's perhaps surprising that the creed is remarkably brief in its coverage of the pivotal event of the crucifixion. On the other hand mainstream Christian belief has never

questioned the fact that Jesus was crucified, that he was unequivocally dead on the cross, and that his body was buried immediately.

In a way the brevity of the creed encourages us to take a step back from the emotions that reflection on Jesus' passion often stir in us. Instead we can consider both how the crucifixion fits in with other elements of the creed, and how it was interpreted from the earliest days of the church.

Questions

1 The creed asserts the truth of what happened, but it does not attempt to explain why it happened. But this section starts with the crucial words *For our sake*. Christians have usually wrestled with why Jesus had to die. What explanation satisfies you?

2 Why did Jesus remain silent for most of the time he was being interrogated? How do we decide when to keep quiet and when to speak out? Does our answer have anything to do with whether we are concerned for other people or for ourselves?

3 In Matthew's account Jesus breaks his silence to make a claim beyond even what the high priest had accused him of. He didn't answer the high priest directly as to whether he was the Messiah, God's anointed one. Instead he applies words from the prophet Daniel (7.13) and Psalm 110.1 to himself. The 'blasphemy' which upset the high priest seems to be in Jesus claiming for himself attributes of God. But it may also be the climax of perceived attacks against the structure of Jewish religion (teaching against priests and Pharisees, the cleansing of the Temple, foretelling its destruction etc – see Matthew 21.12-16 & 33-46; 23.1-39; 24.1-2). What do you think were the main reasons for the authorities' anger at Jesus, and their determination to have him executed?

4 What kind of behaviour in our world do you consider as blasphemy? How do you respond to it?

5 For both Jews and Romans, crucifixion was the most degrading form of execution, reserved for the dregs of society and for slaves. Crucified Jews were regarded as 'cursed by God' (see Deuteronomy 21.23). The early church had to come to terms with the pivotal event of the Christian faith being the scandalous death of God's Son, his anointed one, on a cross. Paul confronts this head-on in 1 Corinthians 1 and elsewhere (eg Galatians 3.13). How easy is it for us to grasp the idea of the scandal of the cross? Are we comfortable with the wisdom of God cutting across and through the wisdom of the world? What might that mean in the context of today's worldly wisdom? How might we tap into the power of God in our own lives?

4: We believe ... in God the Son (part 3)

**On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.**

Daniel 7:1&13-14

Daniel was probably the last book in the Old Testament to be written (c150BC). Early in the Christian era this imagery was applied to Jesus.

7 In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream:

¹³ As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

¹⁴ To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Psalms 15

Revelation 5:6-14

Part of John's vision of heaven.

⁶ Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. ⁸ When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; ¹⁰ you

have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.'

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² singing with full voice,

'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might, and honour and glory and blessing!'

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!'

¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped.

Matthew 16:21-27

Jesus's message to Peter and the other disciples is not an easy one for them to accept.

²¹ Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³ But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save

their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

Compared with the detailed Gospel accounts of the events leading up to Jesus' execution, those of the post-resurrection events are both varied and distinctive (there is no Biblical account of the resurrection itself). The great festival of Easter has always been the central celebration of the Christian faith. The feast of the Ascension forty days after Easter marks the end of Jesus' time on earth.

During those forty days there is a sense of looking forward, but it is more towards the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost than towards Jesus' return. Our readings today focus on what lies beyond Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, and on the hope this gives Christians for life that extends beyond their own death. Because the Bible writers are trying to describe things outside human experience, they use visions, pictures and poetic language to give a sense of Jesus glorified with God in heaven.

Questions

- 1 The New Testament writers were always keen to emphasise continuity with the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament), see for example 1 Corinthians 15.3-4. How important is the Old Testament for your own faith?
- 2 The passage from Daniel is the one Jesus quoted in his trial before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) – last week's Gospel reading. Why did they object to Jesus using this passage as applying to himself? What convinced the first Christians that Jesus' claim was true? What convinces us?
- 3 Much of the book of Revelation is hard to understand and to interpret but this section concentrates on the way in which Jesus, the Lamb, is given glory in heaven. In what ways do you find this passage helpful or unhelpful?
- 4 In the Gospel reading, Jesus is clear that he must suffer, even to the extent of describing Peter as Satan when he protests. The idea of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb is deeply embedded in Christian thought. How do you feel about that image?
- 5 Jesus, in Matthew 16.27, and the creed both assert that *He will come again*. The first Christians thought this return was imminent. What do you think, 2000 years on?
- 6 *Judgement of the living and the dead* is a highly unfashionable topic. How seriously should Christians take it? How might we balance the threat of judgement against the promise of grace?
- 7 During Lent this year we spent time thinking about Christians around the world who are persecuted for their faith. They are daily *taking up their cross and following Jesus*. How should we respond to that from the safety of our own culture? How might God be calling us to *deny ourselves ...?*

5: We believe ... in the Holy Spirit

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.**

Joel 2:28-32

This prophecy about the coming of the Holy Spirit was quoted by Peter in his great speech on the day of Pentecost.

²⁸ I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. ³⁰ I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹ The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³² Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Psalms 51:10-17

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Paul is keen to emphasise that, just as there is only one God, so there is only one Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the

manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

John 1:29-33

The Holy Spirit plays a critical role in preparing Jesus for his public ministry when he is baptized by John the Baptist.

²⁹ John saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' ³² And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

Within the worldwide church, ideas about the Holy Spirit have been the source of major controversy. Historically the most significant of the disagreements was over the clause '*who proceeds from the Father and the Son*'. The eastern churches hold that the Holy Spirit *proceeds from the Father*. The eastern understanding was reflected in the earliest version of the Nicene creed and the words *and the Son (filioque* in Latin) were added by the Western churches, based

on a number of NT passages, from around 800. This difference of belief led to hostility between the western and eastern churches and the issue remains unresolved.

In a quite different way, the role of the Holy Spirit has recently been given much greater prominence in Christian experience and thought by the dramatic growth of churches in the Pentecostal and Renewal traditions.

Questions

1 Earlier in the creed, God the Father is described as the *maker of ... all that is*. What does it mean then when we say that the Holy Spirit is *the giver of life*?

2 Many of us think about the Holy Spirit as being revealed in and through Jesus (eg today's Gospel reading), as being given to the church at Pentecost, and as being explained by Paul in his letters. In other words, the Holy Spirit seems to 'belong' to the New Testament. How easy is it to think of the Holy Spirit inspiring the Old Testament prophets hundreds of years before Jesus? Where else in the OT might we see God's Spirit at work?

3 In Hebrew there is only one word – *ruach* – for the English nouns *spirit*, *wind*, and *breath*. How does this expand our understanding of ways of experiencing the Holy Spirit?

4 How aware are we of the Holy Spirit being at work in our own lives? What difference might he make to us?

5 In what ways would a visitor to our churches see evidence of the Holy Spirit?

6 Why, in the reading from 1 Corinthians 12, is Paul so keen to make the point that there is only one Spirit? What situation or question might he have been responding to?

7 The idea of varieties of gifts for particular purposes is something of a commonplace in church life. In practice how does it work out? Are we really convinced of the value of our own special gifts, or do we think they're not significant or 'religious' enough? Do we fully embrace the gifts of others, particularly those of no apparent practical use?

8 Pentecostal and charismatic Christians tend to have a much more emotional response to the Holy Spirit than do members of traditional churches. How comfortable are we with that, particularly if it becomes the norm over, say, the next 20 years?

6: We believe ... in the Church

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

This prophecy looks forward to God's new covenant with his people. In the event this was brought about by Jesus and was with the new Israel – the Christian church.

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Acts 6:1-7a

Early on the Apostles realized that they could no longer do everything in the Church.

6 Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ² And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that

we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. ³ Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴ while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' ⁵ What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.

Matthew 26:20&26-30

Sharing bread and wine has been a central feature of the Christian church since the night of Jesus's betrayal.

²⁰ When it was evening, Jesus took his place with the twelve; ²⁶ while they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.' ³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Church as a religious organisation didn't spring fully-formed out of its Jewish roots. For many years Jewish Christians continued to worship God in the Jerusalem Temple and in local synagogues. At the same time mainly Gentile churches were being formed around the Mediterranean. The final split from Judaism came with the destruction of the Temple in 70 and the expulsion of Christians from synagogues in the 80s.

From then on it became important for the Church to move towards recognisable unity of belief, exemplified in the sacraments, and structure; this involved identifying and excluding heretics (*one Church*). At its heart was Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God and the significance of Christians as the faithful remnant acknowledging Jesus as Messiah and Lord (the *holy Church*), and the need (Matthew 28:19) to take the Gospel to all the world (thus the *catholic = universal Church*). As well as reflecting Jesus' example, the aim was always to be true to the teaching of the Apostles, including Paul, and this was a guiding principle in identifying orthodox belief (the *Apostolic Church*).

Questions

1 At many levels the worldwide church is split. Closer to home the Anglican communion, and even the Church of England itself, seems under constant threat of breaking or drifting apart. How worried should we be about this? What might we do as individual Christians to bringing the Church closer together? How sincere are we when we pray for unity?

2 How *holy* is the Church of England? The Diocese of Oxford? Our own parish? What does *holy* mean to you in these contexts?

3 How might we as a parish, or as individual Christians, respond better to Jesus' explicit instruction to '*go and make disciples of all nations ...*'?

4 How many of the problems that affect the Church would be overcome, or at least be put in the right perspective, if all of us were truly '*to know the Lord*' (Jeremiah 31:34)?

5 In the reading from Acts we heard about the early Church wrestling with the tension between spiritual and practical matters. How should we try to get the balance right in our own lives, and in our own church?

6 To what extent, and in what ways, might the sacrament of Holy Communion be the means by which some of the shortcomings in the Church could be overcome?

7 The New Testament uses various pictures for the Church – followers of Jesus (Acts 2:42-47); the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-30); the family of God (John 1:11-14); branches of the vine (John 15:1-17); the people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10); a living temple (1 Peter 2:4-10); the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-33). How do these images add to your understanding of what the Church should be like?

7: We believe ... in one baptism

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Psalm 51:1-12

This Psalm is stark and uncompromising in the way it presents our shortcomings and begs God to forgive us.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.

⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Acts 2:36-41

The conclusion of Peter's speech at Pentecost and the reaction of his hearers.

³⁶ 'Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.'

³⁷ Now when the crowd heard this, they

were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' ³⁸ Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' ⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Mark 1:1-8

Mark opens his Gospel by placing the ministry of Jesus in the context of John the Baptist's call to repentance.

¹ The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight".'

⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

The Old Testament prophets often used actions to demonstrate God's message to the people. John the Baptist was the last of the great prophets and he introduced the idea of baptism, which was not a

traditional Jewish ritual, as a sign of repentance and resulting forgiveness (Mark 1:4). Jesus clearly endorsed this by being baptised himself (Mark 1:9-11) and by instructing his disciples to baptise others (Matthew 28:16-20). And his instructions were carried through into the early church, for example Peter's preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:38), and Paul's conversion experience (Acts 22:16) and frequent teaching in his letters (Romans 6:1-4). Paul also emphasises how baptism is one of the unifying characteristics of the church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4-6).

No mainstream Christian church has questioned baptism as the unique rite of initiation into the church of Christ, though there have been, and continue to be, differences of opinion about the baptism of infants, the role of confirmation, baptism as a sacrament, and the relationship between water-baptism and spirit-baptism.

Questions

1 Why does the creed stress one baptism? Is it to emphasise that baptism can only be done once? Or to make it clear that Christian baptism (in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) is one and the same thing, and equally effective, however it is done and whoever it is done by? Or for some other reason?

2 The Church of England, along with many other churches, has always encouraged the baptism of infants. What are the arguments for and against this?

3 Christians believe that Jesus was fully human but sinless. Why then did he seek baptism by John (there is a partial, but somewhat opaque, explanation in Matthew's account – 3:13-17)?

4 At certain times in Christian history, some people have asserted that, if baptism is the guarantee of our sins being forgiven, then after baptism we are incapable of sinning. How do you respond to this idea?

5 What ways are open to us of dealing with the sins we commit after baptism (which for many of us is the whole of our adult lives)?

6 If baptism is a once-for-all chance to have our slate wiped clean, how strong is the argument for deferring baptism as long as possible?

7 The creed focuses on the forgiveness of sins. What are the other effects of baptism?

8 What does Paul mean when he writes this (Romans 6:3-4)? *All of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death ... in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead, ... we too may live a new life.*

8: We believe ... in the resurrection of the dead

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ezekiel's prophecy proclaims God's power even over the dead.

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.'⁴ Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from

your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'

Revelation 7:9-17

Part of John's vision of heaven.

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²singing,

'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' ¹⁴I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

Matthew 22:23-33

Jesus responds to a trick question.

²³ The same day some Sadducees came to Jesus, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying,

²⁴ "Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother."

²⁵ Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. ²⁶ The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. ²⁷ Last of all, the woman herself died. ²⁸ In the resurrection,

then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.'

²⁹ Jesus answered them, 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. ³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³² "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.' ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

Ideas of what happened after death developed significantly but slowly during the Old Testament period from the concept of Sheol, a kind of lifeless underworld (see Isaiah 38.18), to a generally held belief in resurrection, with some dissenters, as shown by Jesus' debate with the Sadducees. The general belief was very physical, as the famous reading from Ezekiel 37 shows, and is worlds apart from the distinction between soul and body in Greek thought.

It was against that background that God raised Jesus from the dead and Christians had to work out what that implied for his followers. It is clear from the New Testament, especially 1 Corinthians 15, that there will be a general resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns to herald the new heaven and new earth. In the same way that Jesus' post-resurrection body was different from his body before death, so will ours be, but we will be *embodied*, not disembodied, and pictures of heaven (being in God's presence) such as John's in Revelation are pointers to the glory of eternal life. In the meantime Jesus has gone before us (John 14:1-6) and we will be with him (Luke 23:43).

Questions

1 How confident are you that the beliefs about resurrection and eternal life are true? To what extent do you reach this position through logic, through trust in the church's teaching, through your own faith, through hope, or by some other means?

2 Paul worked hard in 1 Corinthians 15:35-49 to distinguish our earthbound bodies (often unhelpfully translated as *physical*, *natural* or *fleshly* bodies) from our heavenly or heaven-bound new bodies (even more unhelpfully translated as *spiritual* bodies). How easy do

you find it to envisage a post-resurrection body different from your existing body, but still identifiably you?

3 There are signs in the early church that belief in the imminent return of Christ made Christians careless of worldly matters (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12). How should his eventual return, and what follows from it, affect the way we live our lives now?

4 In John's vision of heaven in Revelation 7, it seems clear that the *great multitude* cannot restrain themselves from extravagant praise in God's presence. To what extent might our own worship reflect a fuller measure of that kind of response?

5 In Revelation 1:1, John attributes his book and its contents to God. He goes on to write: *blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written* (1:3). Given the visionary and poetical nature of John's description of heaven, how should we *take it to heart* and respond to it?

In this poem by John Donne (Divine Sonnet VII), he uses ideas about resurrection as a springboard from which to reflect on his own need to repent and to claim God's grace through Jesus.

**At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scatter'd bodies go;
All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance hath slain, and you whose eyes
Shall behold God and never taste death's woe.
But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For if above all these my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there; here on this lowly ground
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood.**



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