

**Lent Course 2002
Putnoe Heights and St Mark's Church**



Credo

A study of the Apostles Creed

The Apostles' Creed expresses what the Christian Church believes to be within the boundaries of Scripture and the historic teachings handed down since the time of Jesus.

What do you believe?

Welcome to Credo!

Thank you for taking time to use this booklet on the study of the Apostles Creed.

The Apostles Creed has come to be regarded as an excellent summary of the Christian faith. It is not a denominational statement peculiar to a particular groups of Christians, but something considered more fundamental and common to most people who call themselves Christians. It was because of this that the creeds developed in public occasions throughout the church. They were used at Baptisms when the church gathered to affirm the communal belief. There are two ecumenical creeds which are now used commonly in our churches; the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. Time forbids that we can deal with both of them and so I have chosen to concentrate on the Apostles Creed, it is shorter and perhaps also easier to commit to memory and use in your own devotional life.

The Latin word "credo" means "I believe" and it is from this word that we have obtained the word creed. A creed is a statement which contains a summary of our basic beliefs. Over the next few weeks, during Lent, we will consider how the Apostles Creed came into being. We will also consider how the creed can be helpful to us and what place creeds in general should have in our private and corporate worship. We will consider what happens when we find parts of the creed difficult to understand and we will think for a while about the issue of doubt, for there are many times when Christians find belief challenging and occasions when even the strongest Christians question their own faith.

If you are using this booklet in a group setting you will find it helpful to have a Bible which can be used for looking at the verses mentioned. When a large passage is used for Bible study it has been printed so that everybody has access to the same translation. The course is meant to be a stimulus and not a strait-jacket, please feel able to miss bits out or to spend more time on the pieces which the group finds helpful. Hopefully there is more material than you will need, so select what will be useful for you. It will be especially helpful if everybody in the group agrees to read through the forthcoming chapter individually, before they meet together. You can of course use the booklet through just Lent, or continue with it for some time afterwards.

I have not tried at all times to be balanced and fair in representing different opinions. Indeed I have indulged myself in some personal comment from time to time. This is intended only to help provide added spice and I hope that you will feel able to disagree. We are all pilgrims on our journey of faith and no one has a monopoly on the truth. However it is as we share our beliefs and think them through in the light of the Bible, that we grow and change and hopefully are able to learn. I hope and pray that you will find some of this useful and that God will bless you in this period of Lent.

Charles Royden

Chapter 1

Why Creeds?

Introduction

The year 2000 has now been and gone and we are well into the third millennium, yet Christians around the world still continue to confess their faith by reciting the Apostles Creed which can trace its origins to the first century A.D. You might ask, 'should we still be using this creed at all'?

Our society has become increasingly sceptical about the value of many things which were once held sacrosanct. Authority is now questioned almost instinctively and in this anti-authoritarian period, tradition is not revered in the way that it once was. This challenging attitude is no less true in Christianity where value is often placed foremost upon our own experience and immediate gratification. It would be fair to say that whilst the occasional clergyman is asked to leave the church for saying God is an elephant or something equally drastic, most of the time anything goes in terms of belief. That is provided that newspapers do not report it too widely!

Many people would consider a religious experience which they have had to be of importance, whilst, the doctrine or the belief of the church, is largely irrelevant. Make no mistake - at the outset let us remember that a personal encounter with God is what Christianity is all about. However, as soon as we start to talk about God to others and share our experience, as soon as we speak about Jesus and what he means to us - then we are using words, which are doctrinal statements. So doctrine, our beliefs, are important and we cannot do without them.

The church today is ultimately pragmatic and if something works, especially in terms of attracting people into church, then it is endorsed. In the midst of this it may seem a hopeless case to justify studying the Apostles' Creed. However this may be exactly the right time for us Christians to connect ourselves to what all Christians everywhere have always believed. In so doing we remind ourselves that despite ever-changing social circumstances, the Christian faith is not just 'ours.' We have inherited the Christian faith, we did not receive it in a vacuum. Our faith has grown and been handed down to us, to the extent that we believe what we do today because others believed it before us -yesterday and they faithfully passed it on. We must not betray that trust, we have a duty to learn and most importantly—to think.

Why do we say the creed ?

Christians are necessarily a part of a community of faith. When we affirm our faith in Christ we join a body of people whom we must accept as brothers and sisters whether we like it or not. When we openly declare our beliefs in the Apostles Creed we unite ourselves to Christians in the past, present and future. We are a part of a family of faith and our belief is shared with others - we are part of a communion of faith. It is appropriate therefore that the Apostles Creed is said corporately as well as privately. Christianity is a personal experience but it is not a PRIVATE experience. It is to be shared and communicated, hence it needs to be defined. The Apostles Creed helps to define the faith 'This is what I believe'

In the letter of Jude, verse 3, the writer says the following
'Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.'

Clearly the writer believed that it was imperative that the church treated seriously the obligation to contend for the faith which had been passed on to them.

This does not mean that the Apostles Creed is a cage from which we might not grow. Rather as we think about the creedal statements of the Church we are able to move forward in our own belief. The Apostles Creed challenges us to think about our knowledge of Scripture and ultimately our knowledge of God. Knowing Scripture and knowing God also enables us to obey the instruction found in 1 Peter 3:15

'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'

What is a creed ?

Creeds are simply statements of what an individual, or more usually a group of people, believes about a particular topic. They most often define the foundational beliefs that provide the guiding principles for the group's existence. In the Christian Church, creeds are an attempt to summarize in formal statements the basic or essential beliefs which are regarded as truth. The first creeds of the Christian Church are called ecumenical creeds because they were decided upon in church councils that represented the entire church at the time before the church permanently split into Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman) factions in AD 1054.

Creeds are most often used in services of worship in which the entire congregation recites the creed as a confession of the Faith. Today, most Christian churches accept the ecumenical creeds and use them in worship to varying degrees. Some churches recite at least one of the creeds every Sunday, while some traditions make little use of them in regular services of worship.

Are creeds of equal authority to the Bible?

A creed is a confession of faith for public use, a form of words which Christians have found helpful in expressing Christian belief or doctrine. Creeds are never of equal authority with the Bible, however it is clear that over the centuries the Church has had to try to understand what the Bible means. The creeds bear witness to how Christians over time have understood the Bible. Of course some creedal words are actually used in the Bible itself, which shows us that the very first Christians found it necessary to have firm statements of what they believed.

Our creeds are still developing. You will notice that we now say I believe in the Holy Spirit, rather than 'I believe in Him'. The reason for this is because there is no need to think of the Holy Spirit as solely masculine. Feminist theologians have been active in suggesting that the word for Spirit can equally be regarded as feminine. Perhaps this may be an example of the Spirit leading us into truth and enabling to grow in understanding.

Bible Study

The Apostles were concerned that the important truths which they believed were clearly stated and maintained and there is evidence in the New Testament that there were creedal statements current during the life-time of the Apostles. There were brief statements of faith in Christ as the Son of God and in the incarnation (Rom. 10:9; 1 Jn. 4:2), as well as much longer creedal affirmations (1 Tim.3:16). The apostle Paul emphasises the importance of "holding the pattern of sound words," and teaches that the Church is the "pillar and ground of the truth." I have suggested a passage from 1 Timothy for bible study, afterwards, if you have time, there are also some other creedal statements which you can look at in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 3:14

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is

the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labour and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things.

Questions for discussion

Can you spot any early creedal statements in the passage from 1 Timothy 3:14?
What do you think the writer concerned about?
What can we learn today from these words?

Here are some more Creedal statements found in the New Testament

The following scripture passages are considered by many to be creeds or declarations of faith. These are very early statements of what the church just after Jesus believed. See if you can spot the important message which was being declared

Matt. 16:16 Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

Matt. 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

John 1:49 Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

John 6:68-69: Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'

John 20:28: Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

Acts 8:36-37: And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?' And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'

Acts 16:31 And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'

Rom. 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

1 Cor 8:6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

1 Cor 12:3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor 15:3-7 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Phil. 2:6-11 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is

above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Heb. 6:1-2 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

1John 4:2: By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.

Chapter 2

Why Were The Creeds Written ?

To address doctrinal issues, the Apostles and the later church needed use language that precisely addressed the error of the times. Your study of the passage from 1 Timothy might have alerted you to some of the issues of the time. There would undoubtedly have been creeds even if there had been no doctrinal controversy, however it is true that most of the historic Christian creeds and confessions were hammered out on the anvil of controversy. In a certain sense they are to be seen as mile-stones in the history of Christian doctrine. By looking at them we can tell what disputes were going on at the time they were written. The creeds were forged in the crucible of debates, sometimes about nothing less than the nature God's very being. Great minds wrestled with how to confess the Triune God of Sacred Scripture faithfully and fully.

It is therefore reasonable to say that any creed generally emphasizes the beliefs opposing those errors that the compilers of the creed thought most dangerous at the time. This can be illustrated by a brief look at the creeds and the occasions which caused them to be written the way they were.

The Apostles' Creed

Parts of this creed were first drawn up in the first or second century when a religious movement called Gnosticism was influential. The Gnostics argued that they had received a special secret tradition, directly from the apostles. They had special knowledge (the word Gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* knowledge). A man named Marcion could be used as an example of the kind of position which the Apostles Creed would oppose. Marcion was excommunicated in AD144. He was a wealthy ship-owner from Pontus. He suggested that there were two gods, one good and the other bad. The bad one created the world and was the god of the Old Testament and the Jews. The good one created Jesus who mysteriously appeared in the temple at the age 29. Of course this disagreed with the stories of the Gospels and denied the full humanity of Jesus. Necessarily Marcion had to reject much of the Gospels as well as parts of the Epistles, this led Tertullian (c150 - c215) to name him 'The Pontic Mouse who nibbled away the Gospels.'

Another of the important Christians leaders who faced this problem was Irenaeus (c130 - c 200), a bishop in the southern Gallic city of Lyon. He drew up a number of short statements of faith which summarised basic Christian teaching. He said Christians believe

'in one God, the maker of heaven and earth, and of all the things that are in them, through Jesus Christ the Son of God, who, on account of his overwhelming love for his creation, endured the birth from the Virgin, uniting man to God in himself, and suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rose again, and was taken up in majesty, and will come again in glory, the saviour of those who are saved and the judge of those who are judged.'

This statement is basically a prototype of the Apostles Creed and is seen to emphasise the true humanity, including the material body, of Jesus, which is something the Gnostics denied.

The Nicene Creed.

This creed makes a point of stressing that Jesus was fully God and of the same substance as God. It uses words like 'God from God' and 'being of one substance (*homoousios*) with the father.' No prizes for guessing that these were really important issues at the time when it was written! It was written specifically as a polemic against a group of Christians called Arians. The Council of Nicea (June 325) was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine to settle the matter of the nature of Christ. At Nicea, now Iznik in Turkey, the church affirmed the full divinity of Christ. The church had experienced difficulty opposing the views of Arius (c250 - c336). Arius stated that Jesus was a special created being, but not God. The phrase 'there was when he was not' characterises his position. Athanasius was the man who opposed Arius and stated that if Jesus was not divine then he could not redeem fallen humanity. The church found it almost impossible to correct the teaching of Arius and they therefore expressed, in their own language, what they supposed to be the doctrine of Scripture concerning the Divinity of Jesus. They drew up the Nicene Creed and called upon Arius and his disciples to subscribe. This Arius and his followers refused to affirm and Arius was expelled. For Athanasius the faith of Arius was not Christianity, it could be Judaism with its solitary God. However if the divinity of Christ was challenged then Jesus could not be trusted to deliver his promises. Only If Christ was God then we could have confidence.

Needless to say once the divinity of Christ had been agreed by the church, the fact that he was of 'one substance with the father,' - then eventually the doctrine of the Trinity had to follow.

How are the creeds still helpful today ?

Not everybody likes creeds "Deeds not creeds!" has periodically become the cry of some in the Christian community. It is fitting and appropriate that we should consider whether the creeds are helpful to us in our Christian life and in our collective worship. Should we even have such a creed? Clearly not everybody would value reciting creeds in worship and some churches never do. There are several factors which are often mentioned, you may be able to think of some of your own!

- In our democratic society there has been a tendency toward individualism and anti-authoritarianism.
- In our age there is less and less respect for history.
- There is a great downplaying of doctrine. Methods, social change, experience and gifts are all considered more important in a pragmatic society.
- Some would claim that the creeds are human documents which undermine the supremacy of Scripture.
- Some groups such as the Quakers, object to creeds because they fear that they will obstruct free interpretation of the Bible and interfere with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment. They would also consider them to produce division.

Let us consider some reasons why creeds can be useful

1. To stop us repeating our mistakes

We have seen that the creeds were brought into being as the church dealt with controversial ideas and struggled to determine what it truthfully believed about God and what was plain wrong. In one sense there is nothing new under the sun and by studying the way in which Christian truth asserted itself we are better prepared to deal false belief in our own time. For example, the beliefs of Gnosticism which were around when the Apostles Creed was formulated, were not unlike many modern New Age movements. Creeds are therefore useful because they alert us to the historical problems which have arisen in our faith. If we do not learn from mistakes which have been made then we are doomed to repeat them.

2. To define our faith and help us avoid wrong belief

We might be reluctant today to call people heretics or oppose teaching which we consider to be incompatible with orthodox belief. However if the church had not dealt with people like Arius and Marcion, then nothing less than a true understanding of the nature of Jesus would be lost. It is only as the church maintains its opposition to false ideas that the Christian faith is preserved. The creed for example clearly challenges those who hold beliefs such as Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses who today, like Arius, do not accept the divinity of Christ

The church today is often more concerned with feeling than thinking. Let me illustrate that by the many choruses used by soft-core Christian churches, especially in the charismatic evangelical churches, which display dubious theology, but which are extremely popular because of the tune. Christians raise their hands in worship during songs but only those with great tunes. Our thinking has often been subordinated to our worshipful emotions. This is not to say emotion is always bad, but the church must not let it overrule, we desperately need to think more clearly. Great theology must not be subordinated to a selfish sentimental spirituality. Emotional highs must not be sought in preference to any development of serious belief. The church of our time needs a theology which challenges those tunes which are substitutes for the hard thinking the Christian faith requires.

The word heresy has a bad history in the church and has been as much to do with intolerance as truth. However there are ideas which we should term 'orthodox' and others which are blatantly wrong. There is a difference between unbelief, which rejects Christianity and heresy which is a distortion of it. A Moslem does not believe, but they are not a heretic. Heresy is reserved for when somebody accepts the Christian faith, but then distorts it. As an example Christianity teaches that Jesus is God and that through him human beings are reconciled to God. If a Christian teaches that really everybody is a Christian, because they are made by God, then that is obviously wrong and the church needs to challenge it as heresy.

For this reason one of the main purposes of the creeds is perhaps to define the Christian faith. We read them and they tell us what a Christian believes. As we read them we can see how our own belief fits in with the traditional teaching of the church which the Christians have gathered from Scripture. For example, once we have learned the Apostles' Creed, we will always have an answer to questions such as "What *do* you Christians believe? You will know what makes you different from say Moslems or Buddhists. You will know that the Apostles' Creed represents what Christians have believed since the time of the Apostles. Since that time the church has considered that it lies within the boundaries of Scripture and the historic teachings of the church.

The belief of some people can change like the fashion industry. However when we affirm the Apostles' Creed we connect ourselves to what all Christians everywhere have always believed. In so doing we remind ourselves that despite ever-changing social circumstances, the Christian faith is founded on important historical and truth.

Studying this historic creed also moves us forward in our faith. For as we develop a deeper understanding of its teachings, we thereby grow in our knowledge of Scripture and ultimately our knowledge of God. Such knowledge helps us keep in step with the Holy Spirit. It allows our lives to be good soil from which God can bring forth much fruit (Matt 13:23; Gal. 5:22-25). Knowing Scripture and knowing God also enable us to obey Peter's instruction to
'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15).

3. To declare our faith

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told the disciples that they were to be his witnesses to all the world. The third purpose of creeds fulfils this need to declare our faith. We use the creeds

for a corporate witnessing before God and the world. It is a positive, fearless declaration of our Christian faith. The Apostles Creed is a useful way for every Christian to declare his or her faith throughout everyday life. Luther said that a Christian should confess the Apostles Creed eight times daily."

Consider this passage from Romans 10:12

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

So ,when Christians gather for worship and together recite the Apostles Creed, we declare that these are the essential articles of our faith.

Bible Study Write your own creed!

(You will have to supply the Bible passages yourself for this study)

When Marcion formulated his belief that Jesus appeared in the Temple at the age of 29, he recognised that it disagreed with the evidence of the infancy stories from the New Testaments. As a result he had to take lots of pieces out of the Bible. Of course this is the wrong way round, our creeds should be drawn from the evidence of our scripture, our scripture should not be changed to coincide with our pet theology.

In the sixteenth century the German Lutheran writer Philip Melancthon introduced a new word into the vocabulary of theology. He coined the word *adiaphora* 'matters of indifference'.

For Melancthon the Gospel consisted of a central core, centering on the person of Jesus . The central core was surrounded by a concentric ring, containing doctrines of secondary importance. Doctrines in the central core were not negotiable, but there could be tolerance within the church on the matters outside. To affirm the doctrines in the central core was to be a Christian, to affirm doctrines in the outer circle made you a particular type of Christian.

In our society we are surrounded by different faiths, many of which are militant in the zeal to convert others. As Christians we need to know what unites us and is authentic and of importance in our doctrine.

So what are fundamentals and what are matters of indifference?

- Think what you would like to write in your creed to pass on to future generations. What truths are important for you to affirm as a Christian?
- Write them down and then, if you are in a group, find passages yourself from scripture which support your beliefs.

Chapter 3

Studying The Apostle's Creed

1. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth;
2. and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
3. who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary;
4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. (He descended to hell;)
5. On the third day he rose again from the dead
on the third day he was raised from the dead;
6. He ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
7. from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.
8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;
9. in the holy catholic Church; (the communion of saints;)
10. the forgiveness of sins;
11. the resurrection of the flesh
12. and eternal life.

Parts in brackets are not found in eastern versions of the work.

The Background

Statements of what we believe can be divisive, however one of the features of the Apostles Creed is that is ecumenical. It affirms belief upon which Christians across the denominations can agree. In 1920 the Lambeth Conference recognised the Apostles Creed as one of the four pillars of Christian unity. In 1927 the World Conference of Faith and Order, meeting at Lausanne, declared that this creed could be used by all Christians. This is therefore a point of unity.

It was during Lent that many new Christians were taught the faith and eventually recited the Apostles Creed together before baptism on Easter Day. The Apostles Creed as we have noted was based upon scripture and an attempt to understand it. As we proceed and attempt to think about it, please try and have these questions in your mind and refer to them

- To which scriptures does the doctrine which the Apostles Creed proclaims relate?
- What does it tell us about God, Jesus and ourselves?
- How can I apply this to my Christians living?

For many years Christians believed that the twelve Apostles were the authors of the widely known creed that bears their name. According to an ancient legend the Apostles wrote this creed on the tenth day after Christ's ascension into heaven. The twelve composed the Apostles Creed with each Apostle adding a clause to form the whole. Today practically all scholars understand this theory of Apostolic composition to be legendary. Nevertheless, many continue to think of the Apostles Creed as Apostolic in nature because its basic teachings are agreeable to the theology of the Apostles.

Whilst there is no evidence that the Apostles actually wrote the Apostles Creed, there is equally no evidence that most of the books of the Bible were written by the authors whose name they bear. However just like the books of the Bible we can, through careful study, make some very accurate judgements as to who the real author might have been. The full form in which the Apostles Creed now appears stems from about 700 AD. However we can observe the development which took place. A study of Matthew 28:19 will show that the Apostles Creed forms an expansion of words which are attributed to Jesus himself who gives the church a simple credal statement

*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost Matthew 28:19*

Early fragments of creeds have been discovered which declare simply:
*'I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord.
And in the Holy Spirit, the holy Church, the resurrection of the flesh.'*

The Old Roman Creed.

The most important predecessor of the Apostles Creed was the Old Roman Creed, which was probably developed during the second half of the second century. Around A.D. 180, the Roman Christians would need these words to refute Marcion as well as a statement for use in baptism. Remember that Marcion believed the Old Testament God was a tyrant who had created an evil world. Marcion believed that Jesus revealed, in contrast, a good God of love and mercy. For Marcion, then, Jesus was not the Messiah proclaimed by the prophets, and the Old Testament was not Scripture. For the Gospels to be accepted as scripture all the birth narratives had to be taken out since Jesus was not fully human.

So the Roman Creed affirmed that the God of the creation is the Father of Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, was buried and raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven, where he rules with the Father. They also affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, the church, and the resurrection of the body.

The additions to the Apostles Creed are clearly seen when its present form is compared to the Old Roman version

I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the flesh.

Tertullian (c 150 - c215), (Virg. Vel. I) describes the faith of the church as follows -

'believing in one God Almighty, Maker of the world, and in his Son Jesus Christ, born of Mary the Virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate; the third day he rose again from the dead, received in the heavens, sitting now at the right hand of the Father, about to come to judge the quick and the dead, through the resurrection also of the flesh.'

Clearly the basis of the Apostles Creed goes a long way back, to the Apostles and to Jesus himself. It has therefore been repeated by Christians for a long time and has been developed by the church along the way. For this reason however the Apostles Creed as we have it today should be thought of as a summary of the Apostles' teaching rather than directly attributable to them.

Conclusion.

The Apostles Creed clearly was important for several reasons.

1. To attack heresy

As we have seen the Apostles Creed served to ensure that orthodox doctrine prevailed, especially thinking which sought to change the understanding of the church about the nature of Jesus. Specifically the creed emphasizes the true humanity, including the material body, of Jesus. This was in direct opposition to those who considered that Jesus was not fully human.

2. It served a devotional purpose

By the sixth or seventh century the creed had come to be accepted as a part of the official liturgy of the Western church. Likewise, it was used by devout individuals along with the Lord's Prayer. In a time when most Christians were illiterate, oral repetition of the Apostles' Creed and creedal statements, along with such things as the Lord's Prayer helped preserve and transmit the faith of

the western churches. These essential pieces of the faith were used by devout Christians as a part of their devotional prayer.

3. Liturgical use

The Apostles Creed functioned in many ways in the life of the church. For one thing, it was associated with entrance into the fellowship as a confession of faith for those to be baptized. In addition, catechetical instruction was often based on the major tenets of the creed.

Bible Study John Chapter 6:25

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Questions for discussion

- What does Jesus mean when he says that believing is a work of God?
- What sign would convince people today that Jesus was God?
- Are some people just destined to believe and others not?
- What do you mean when you say "I believe ...?"
- Is there a difference between believing with your head and believing with your heart?"

Chapter 4

The Place of Doubt

Doubt is one of those taboo subjects. We are afraid that if we admit to doubts, people will feel less of us, that we will look stupid. Yet doubt is not an unusual or particularly unhealthy thing. Doubt is not scepticism, the decision to doubt as a matter of principle. Neither is it unbelief, the decision not to have faith in God. Unbelief is an act of will, rather than a difficulty with understanding. If a child in class has difficulty understanding, finds a subject difficult or not to make sense, we don't even begin to call that doubt. Doubt often means asking questions, or voicing uncertainties from the standpoint of faith. You believe but you have difficulty with that faith. Doubt is probably a permanent feature of the Christian faith. As life is a permanent battle against disease, so a life of faith is a permanent battle against doubt.

Many people come to faith with doubts. We don't have to understand everything, indeed it would be strange if we did. This is what all relationships are like, we don't know the half of people before we get involved with them! How could we? When we embark upon any relationship we take a risk. Our doubt reminds us that we are in need of growth and development in our relationship with God.

We know that God is bigger than our minds, we know that we have to use analogies and images. Doubt is a spiritual reminder that we don't know it all and that we have a limitation as a result of our humanity.

We long for absolute security and certain proof. Yet we do well to remind ourselves that what we can know with absolute certainty is likely to be not that important. Tennyson said

*For nothing worthy proving can be proven
Nor yet disproven: wherefore thou be wise,
Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt*

But Christianity is not intellectual suicide. It is not like the emperor's new clothes. We are not afraid of questions and analysis. If we have serious questions we should ask them and think them through. Christianity is about encounter with the living God and yet there is also a challenge to the mind to begin to understand and grasp our faith. Experience should be reinforced with understanding. But we have to realise that life will be filled with much we do not understand.

An interesting passage from Romans 13:11-12.

*'The night is nearly over, the day is almost here'
Gives the idea that the Christian life is as walking in the dark.*

Paul also uses the classic illustration in 1 Corinthians 13:12

'Now we see but a poor reflection in a mirror.'

There are many things which we can expect to be unclear to us.

We have not let God down if we doubt. Indeed our faithfulness is proved when we persevere through our doubts and uncertainties. Psalm 42 may be helpful for it shows the Psalmist talking to God about his doubts and difficulties. He is brutally honest with God.

Psalm 42

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon--from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is

with me-- a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.

God promises us his love, assures of his presence with us, even when we find it difficult to comprehend. In John 10:28, Matthew 28:20 God promises to be with us, we need to know these promises are true.

Do we have to understand and believe every word?

It's not unusual to have doubts and questions. In our church I hope that questions are encouraged. Our relationship with God is a personal journey and also one we share with others in this community of faith. The Apostles Creed clearly state the beliefs of the Church and we recite them as we join with those around us in the process of discovering our own relationship with God. So it's not easy to answer this question "yes" or "no." The importance is to take part with fellow pilgrims in this lifelong journey. Obviously there are some Christians who find statements in the Apostles Creed unacceptable, e.g. the meaning of virgin birth. The Apostles Creed should not be considered as a cage from which might never depart, but rather as bearing witness to the historic faith of the church which we have inherited.

To answer such questions, we must consider not only what we believe, but how we believe.

Bible Study Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Commentary

If you were thinking of using a passage to consider doubt would you have chosen 'The Great Commission'? Well actually whilst it is an unlikely place, it is nevertheless a good one! In Matthew 28:16-17, we learn that after Jesus' resurrection the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; 'but some doubted.'

When I think of the Great Commission, the words 'but some doubted' are not the first that come to mind. But, especially considering their context, these words are very comforting. Some of the disciples – who had spent three years of their lives with Jesus, who had heard with their own ears his prophecy of his impending death and resurrection – doubted, even as Jesus stood right before them. They had heard that the tomb was empty, walked miles to meet with Jesus, saw him and began to worship him, yet even as they worshiped some doubted.

That some disciples simultaneously worshiped and doubted reassures us that absolute freedom from doubt is not a precondition to the worship of God. Rather, the disciples' conflicting response indicates that having doubts about things we do not fully understand is not ultimately incompatible with worshiping the one we know to be our Saviour and Lord.

How can that be? One way of approaching this question is to distinguish between the content of our faith and the structure of our faith; between what we believe and how we believe.

Christians believe and teach that God does exist, and that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is his only begotten Son. However, as finite, human beings, there are times when our faith may be shaken, when circumstances may lead us to question our most basic beliefs. Perhaps we have doubted God's providence because one we loved died, or our hopes and dreams were dealt a bitter blow. Perhaps we have doubted God's love because of a painful situation in our family. Perhaps, because a fervent prayer seems to have gone unanswered, we have wondered whether the God we worship even exists.

Yet, despite our doubts, we continue to worship. And, despite our doubts, God accepts our adoration and praise. That is because God knows that we are finite, fallen, fallible creatures whose hearts and minds, clouded as they are by sin, are prone to doubt. Yet God continues to love us just as we are.

Nowhere in Scripture does God condemn a believer who has doubts. Remember Gideon? He had serious doubts about leading the people into battle, so he laid out a fleece not once, but twice. God honoured both requests (Judges 6:36-40). And when Thomas said '*Unless I see ... I will not believe,*' Jesus answered, '*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe*' (John 20:24-29).

While doubt is nowhere commended as an attitude to cultivate, neither does Scripture teach that our doubts lead God to cease caring for us. God knows the frailty of our human nature, and he responds to our doubts, as to our other weaknesses – with steadfast love.

Faith in Jesus Christ does not mean living a life free from doubts any more than it means living a life free of suffering, trials, and temptations. It does mean that when doubts arise, we can prayerfully discuss them with God and ask him for wisdom.

Had the disciples lacked faith, they never would have gone from Jerusalem to Galilee to meet someone they had watched die on a cross. Had the disciples lacked faith, they would not have worshiped their living Lord. They went and they worshiped, but some doubted. Yet despite their doubts, these disciples recognized their risen Lord as God in human flesh, and they worshiped him.

As we have already noted, the most basic creed of the Christian faith is 'Jesus Christ is Lord.' To be sure, that confession does not give full expression to the breadth and depth of what it is to be a Christian. But once an individual confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, he or she is ready to begin a journey to try and understand our faith. Will doubts arise along the way? Undoubtedly! For doubt is not the opposite of faith. Disbelief is the opposite of faith. Doubt is merely a part of how we believe. But like the disciples, despite our doubts, we must worship our risen Lord. And like them, we must then obey the command to '*go and make disciples of all nations,*' secure in Jesus' promise that, '*surely I am with you, to the very end of the age*' (Matt. 28:19-20).

Questions

- Must Christians believe without reservation every affirmation of the Apostles' Creed?
- Is it possible to trust Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and yet be unsure about some things the Bible teaches?
- Do you find it helpful to think that doubt is not the opposite of faith, but a part of how we believe?

Chapter 5

I Believe

Our English word 'creed' comes from the Latin *credo*, which means, "I believe." A creed is thus my statement of what it is that I believe. More technically, a creed is a concise, formal, and authorized statement of essential Christian doctrine. What does it mean for Christians to say "I believe?"

It would be possible to recite the Apostles' Creed and skip over these two words at the beginning as a prelude to the really important words that follow, words like God, Jesus Christ, and resurrection.

However, these words are an important foundation for our study of the Apostles Creed. The words "I believe" challenge us about the nature and purpose of our faith.

The earliest Christian creed was spoken by Peter at Caesarea Philippi. In response to Jesus' question, *'But who do you say that I am,'* Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, replied, *'You are the Christ'* (Mark 8:29). Writing to the Philippians some three decades later, Paul concluded his marvellous Hymn to Christ with what remains one of the foundational creeds of Christianity, *"Jesus Christ is Lord"* (Phil. 2:11).

What does believe mean ?

Every Sunday countless Christians around the world echo this father's faith as they recite an ancient creed that begins with the words "I believe." But what, exactly, does it mean for a contemporary Christian to affirm "I believe ..."?

To say "I believe" is to give intellectual assent to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: that God is our Father, the creator of the heavens and the earth; that Jesus is his only Son, our only Saviour; that the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit makes us one with God and with each other. However the word 'believe' is more than just having an intellectual assent. It encompasses trust. The trouble with 'believe' is that it is too mental or theoretical to represent adequately the trust that is part of faith. Some people would distinguish between believing from the head and believing from the heart. There is a sense in which when we have faith we do not necessarily have all the answers, or understand everything, but we are prepared to take it on trust.

I think that there is a likeness here between

faith & doubt and faith & fear

We can have faith and still doubt just as we can have faith and still fear. I may say that because I have faith I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil, Psalm 23. I would bet that most people walking through the valley of the shadow of death would fear evil, but what the Psalmist is really saying is that he will continue to walk through the valley irrespective of any fears he may have - because he trusts in God to care for him. Having the courage to walk through the valley does not imply that we will not have the usual fears. In the same way expressing our faith in God is a commitment of our will to trust in God and affirm the truths which he has given to us, even though we may find them hard to understand and have doubts.

If we follow this thinking through then we could say that we believe the Apostles Creed expresses the thoughts handed down to us by generations of Christians from the time the Apostles and Jesus himself. Therefore even if there are pieces of the creed which we do not understand or find difficult, we are confident to share in that faith which we have inherited and perhaps take some of it on trust!

This may seem completely radical, accepting things which we do not fully understand and subscribing to them? In response we can only say that this is exactly what we do when we enter

into a relationship with somebody. We love them, we trust them and we are prepared to learn more about them as we go along. It may also be helpful to consider that in the Apostles' Creed we do not confess 'I believe that,' but rather 'I believe in ...' There is a world of difference between 'that' and 'in.' There is a difference in saying 'I believe you are a human,' and 'I believe in you.' To believe *in* you, means I put my trust in you. As Christians, we say we 'believe' in God, because our religion is essentially a relationship with God based on trust. We Christians trust not only the promises of God and live accordingly, but we trust our very lives completely to God by surrender and commitment. We trust the everlasting arms of God, underneath us, to save us from fear, death, and hell. By faith we commit our lives into God's hands and we can relax.

Of course we must also remember that such faith is more than just talking. When we say that we believe in God then that faith and commitment must evidence itself in action, obedience, or works. In that respect the Apostles Creed necessitates an ethical response as well.

Let us then consider belief. You may find it helpful to use the following bible study, since it raises some of the important questions which we have to consider.

Bible Study Mark 9:14-29

When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked. A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not." "O unbelieving generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me." So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. "You deaf and mute spirit," he said, "I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?" He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

Commentary

The father of a demon-possessed boy brought his son to Jesus' disciples, who tried but failed to drive the demon out. Disillusioned and despairing the father cried out to Jesus, 'If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.' Jesus replied, 'All things are possible for the one who believes.' Immediately the father responded, 'I believe ...'

Clearly the father of the demon-possessed boy believed. That is why he brought his son to Jesus and his disciples. He was able to declare, 'I believe.' Yet in the same breath he also cried out to Jesus, 'Help my unbelief.' This may seem a remarkable contradiction, however, perhaps only the existence of this father's faith could have made him conscious of its weakness. His request for Christ to help him overcome his unbelief showed his insight into the power of Christ to do far more than merely heal his child. Although it may have been dimmed by the disciples' failure, the father's faith revived and flourished when he stood face to face with Jesus. Addressing this still common problem of our own frailty, William Barclay comments,

'The Church may disappoint us; the servants of the Church may disappoint us; but when we battle our way face to face with Jesus Christ, he never disappoints us.'

The father came to Jesus seeking help for his son. He quickly recognized the limitations of his own faith and thus realized that he needed help as well. The relationship of doubt and faith may be helpful for us as we recognise that there are things which all of us might experience which test our faith. This father's timeless supplication, *'I believe; help my unbelief,'* helps to encourage us to confess our faltering and imperfect faith, using an ancient creed that begins with the words *'I believe.'*

Questions for discussion

- To what extent do you believe that you should understand about God before believing in Him?
- How much did you understand when you came to faith?
- Why do so many Christians continue to make use of the Apostles Creed which dates back almost 2,000 years? Do you find its antiquity a comfort or that it makes this Creed irrelevant?
- What are some benefits, and possible problems, with the use of creeds in the church?
- Can you think of ways in which the Apostles' Creed could help you with either the definition, defence, or declaration of your faith ?

Chapter 6

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of the heavens and earth

I believe in Godthe creator

The Apostles Creed begins by affirming our belief in God. The Bible does not set out to prove God. Instead we find assumptions which take God for granted.

'Only the fool says in his heart there is no God' Psalm 53:1

The Apostle Paul thought that everybody should believe in God, because it was so blatantly obvious that there was God, all one had to do was look at the world around. This idea is shown forcibly in Romans 1:18-20

'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse'

Anybody looking at this world from a vantage points, perhaps a mountain pass or the top of a very high mountain, or perhaps looking at the sea and its tremendous power, could hardly fail to be impressed by creation. There is in the created order something which inspires us, of the presence of someone bigger and greater than ourselves. We are aware of the awesome nature of the worlds in which we live and we recognise that mankind is not the all powerful. Many scientists are prepared to express their recognition that we do not even know the origin of matter. 90% of this universe we know absolutely nothing about. It all throws into perspective the words of wisdom of people such as Hawking, who claim to have discovered the origins of the universe and to have been able to discount God. The truth is that the majesty of creation betrays an amazing creator.

From the beauty and design of the world we recognise that there must be a creator behind it all. In the same way that if we walk along a beach and find a watch we must accept the presence of a watchmaker, the dials and cogs did not all fall into place by themselves. To say there is no creator is like putting a collection of letters into a bucket and expecting that by pouring them out we would produce a beautiful poem by sheer chance. The result of this has been that the passage of time does not weaken our sense of the presence of the divine. People of all nations have engraved upon their minds an innate belief that the gods exist'

The Gnostics who were around when the Apostles Creed was being formulated, felt themselves to be strangers in an evil world, spiritual beings in a world of flesh. Many people today feel that they are isolated and lonely in a vast impersonal universe. The light from the sun takes a mere eight minutes to reach us; that from one of the nearer stars, Betelgeuse, in the constellation of Orion, takes nearly 200 years. So that we perhaps see the light only now of stars which have already died. We are living in a truly enormous universe. However the doctrine of creation teaches us that this is not a vast impersonal world in which we can get lost and forgotten. God made and loves it and all of his creatures. We are here because God loves us and made us. The stars are not symbols of our futility and lack of worth, rather they are reminders of God's promises and their fulfilment (Genesis 15:1-6)

Please read Psalm 8:1 which is full of appreciation for God's magnificent work

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. When I consider your heavens, the work of your

fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

We live in God's world, it is vibrant and full of God's life. The Old Testament prophets saw this. They saw the mind of God in simple illusions from life; like boiling pots and plumb lines, they were angry when they saw poor people and people who took advantage of the weak. Sadly Protestant Christianity has often despised the body, creation or anything to do with it. The Reformation had very little to say about creation which was positive. Calvin considered the natural world corrupt because of the fall. Luther taught the idea of two kingdoms. The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World occupied separate spheres of existence.

It has been largely solitary voices which have championed natural theology, theology which gave some degree of God given quality to the environment. There has been a tendency to regard the creation rather like a larder which God has given us to keep us alive. The Christian view is that the world is not a larder simply to be consumed for our own use. Creation is good and of value in itself, apart from its usefulness to mankind. Genesis itself is helpful in this context for it tells us that God created out of nothing, 'ex nihilo' so that everything which was made came from God.

'God saw everything that He had made and it was good'. Gen 1:31

The fact there was nobody else responsible (Heb 11:3, Rom 4:17) was a truth which Greek philosophy found unacceptable. They depreciated the physical and emphasised the spiritual. Plato said that earthly things were only copies of the true spiritual realm. On the contrary Christians say that God loves the world, he made it and we can see the residue of God himself in it. There is no room for a dualism, that is- two gods a good and a bad one, rather everything is Gods,

In Him we live and move and have our being Acts 17:28

He is in all Eph 4:6

Wherever we see light or life or good we see God Jn 1:4, 10

Remember the words of the Apostle John, *'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son'* (John 3:16). The word used is *kosmos* which means everything! God loves everything, including the soil and the fields. Therefore whilst we use bread and wine in our sacrament, all creation is itself sacramental, a physical means of demonstrating a spiritual reality. All creation declares God.

I believe in God - The Father Almighty

Having established the existence of God, the Apostles Creed continues by calling God 'Father' because Jesus taught his disciples that this is how they should pray. Jesus must have amazed those around by addressing God as 'Father'. The word Jesus would have used for Father is 'Abba,' as used in the hymn 'Abba Father.' It is a term of affection and intimacy used by children of their fathers. The Pharisees never used such a title to address God. Jesus used this quite distinctively and possibly uniquely. We can be sure that not until Jesus does it become characteristic to speak to God as Father.

God was close to Jesus and this is shown clearly by his choice of this word. Moreover Jesus wants this level of intimacy to be shared by us all. Most probably the word 'Father' would have appeared presumptuous, and this is one reason why it would not have been used. But Jesus was showing us that this was the kind of relationship with us which God desires. A relationship so personal that we can call the Creator of the universe 'Father'. God is somebody

we can approach as we go to a human parent and share the good times and the bad, the success as well as the failure, the joys and sorrows. As 'Father', God is concerned for the needs of his children.

Almighty

However whilst God is Father he is not just an 'ordinary father.' The Apostles Creed stresses that God is also Almighty and as such is beyond our grasp. I have a personal belief that because we like the cosy idea of God as 'Father.' we have lost some of what it means for God to be Almighty. God has for many Christians become so familiar that he tells us things on a daily basis, communicating on matters as mundane as finding a car park space when they are late to church. It may be helpful to think through how we think about God.

A classic example of human beings cutting God down to size can be seen in the dating of the universe. This also proves that the human arrogance which sees God as intimate and understandable is nothing new. James Usher, Archbishop of Armagh from 1625 - 1656 concluded that the beginning of time fell upon the entrance of the night preceding the 23rd day of October in the year of the Julian calendar, 710. Calculating that 710 in the Julian calendar equated to 4004 BC he announced that the world would end, according to Jewish tradition, 6,000 years later at 6.00pm.

This is not something obscure or cranky and if you have an old Authorised Version of the Bible it will have the dates in the margin according to Archbishop Usher. Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University said, *'What staggers me about Archbishop Usher's statement is not that he was wrong - so was everybody else - but that he was wrong with such precision'*.

The 13 day difference between the Julian and the Gregorian calendar adopted in the 18th century means that it could be on November 4th. And Professor Mark Bailey of Armagh observatory pointed out that we may be a year early because Usher's chronology ran from 1 BC to 1 AD without a year 0. So the 6,000 will come next year on October 23rd or November 4th.

John Lightfoot 1602 - 1675 was vice chancellor of Cambridge University in 1654 and perfected Usher's work even further and pinpointed the exact moment when Adam was created, it was October 23rd 4004 BC at 9am. This was apparently chosen to coincide with the Cambridge University term, yes it really is that unbelievable!

Human thought can be so precise about God and so precisely wrong. Some of you may be aware of the arguments which have taken place over the creation of the world. When Darwin wrote his book 'On the origin of the species by means of natural selection,' 1859 it created rows of immense proportions. Men like Bishop Wilberforce held public debates against the likes of T. H. Huxley to condemn Darwin and his ideas, sadly it was a redundant argument, because the Bible does not give us a chronological or scientific account of creation in either of the creation stories. Indeed modern chronological timescales are of little importance to any of the biblical writers, even in the New Testament where the writers feel able to move incidents from the beginning of Jesus ministry to the end with complete abandon.

It was Augustine who first suggested that the Biblical writers might have been presenting a literary account of creation rather than a scientific one and that creation might have taken rather a long time. To speak of a 'day' is a good way of separating the things that God did. This would explain how the story has day and night going on before the sun and moon were created.

If you look at the pages of the Old Testament there are no big bang theories, no theories of evolution, we are not told which test tubes God mixed with which. It is simply not given for us to know. This is very sad for us who imagine that we have wisdom and understanding, but God does not give us that privilege. No rather we have a story, which tells us in broad brush principles that God made it and we messed it up. There is nothing which says whether it was made by evolution, perhaps it was and perhaps it wasn't.

This human arrogance and attempt to put God into a man sized box can only end in tears and eventually Pope John Paul 11 (October 23rd 1996) declared that Darwin's theory of evolution was compatible with the Christian faith. In a message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences which advises the Vatican on scientific matters. He said that the theory of natural selection was more than just a hypothesis.

The problem we have is one of trying to order God to our rules and patterns. There is an arrogance of humankind which supposes that we can really reduce God to a size which we can handle. It is in the face of this arrogance the bible teaches us that God is Almighty.

The Christian church uses these three words to describe God, which if we remember them will keep us away from some of the dangers of human spiritual arrogance

1. Omnipotence

The Christians church has used the word Omnipotent to describe God. It is used because it means OMNI = All POTENS = powerful - All powerful.

It means that God can decide to do anything which he wants to do. This power is spoken of frequently in scripture. In Psalm 24:8 it says that God is

'The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle'.

This realisation came upon believers quite quickly in the development of faith. Right back in Genesis Chapter 18:14 God asks a rhetorical question of Abraham concerning whether Sarah could have a child when she was well past the age of childbearing he says to Abraham, *'Is anything too hard for the Lord'*? The answer of course is 'no' - there is nothing which is too hard for the Lord. In Jeremiah Chapter 32:17 the prophet comes to the realisation that if God made this world then there is obviously no constraint upon his power to act in it.

'Ah sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.'

The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 3:20 that God was *'able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think'* and in 2 Corinthians 6:18 he called God using the word 'almighty'

This property of God as 'almighty' is shown throughout the pages of scripture. It is in the ability to show miraculous signs and cause Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. It is in the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary when he said 'with God nothing is impossible' (Luke 1:37). Jesus himself said *'With God all things are possible'* (Matthew 19:26)

This power of God is known as sovereignty. It stresses the infinite nature of God's power. Whenever we are tempted to say impossible we need to remember that with God all things are impossible.

2. Omnipresence

The only answer to the question of where everything comes from must be that ultimately there is something or someone who created matter and time in the first place. Christians believe in a God who is unlimited or infinite with respect to time and space. God created what we know as time for us to use wisely as one of his gifts - worth remembering in our current hectic schedules. This attribute of God is known as OMNIPRESENCE OMNI = All PRESENCE.

We could define it as follows - God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being. In Jeremiah 23:23 we read - *'Am I only a God nearby, declares the Lord and not a God far away? Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and the earth.'*

Nothing we think or speak or do is secret from God, so that when we place our life in his hands we have one who goes with us in all things.

God's omnipresence is expressed powerfully in the Psalm 139:7-10

*Whither shall I go from your spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.*

Note that the psalmist doesn't see God's presence as a threat but as him being able to uphold, God presence is to be a blessing to all of us. We are never away from him. Paul expresses this beautifully in the New Testament in Acts 17:27 when he says -

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.

People have always wanted to build churches and temples as sacred places for God to live. There is an honest thought about this but it is a folly for us to imagine that we can create a house for God. The truth is that these places are perhaps better seen as being places which remind us of the fact that God is everywhere. Sometimes in the hustle and bustle of life we forget and we need to be somewhere where we can come to our senses and realise that God is all around us.

3. Omniscience

This literally means 'All knowing.' In the first letter of John Chapter 3:20 the writer says that God 'Knows everything.' In Hebrews 4:13 there is an interesting phrase which says that before God 'no creature is hidden but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do'

The bible tells us that not only does God know what has been and what is, but that he also knows in the future. Isaiah 46:9-10

*'I am God and there is none like me declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done.'*

The point that is being made is that God knows everything now, he isn't learning about the world and responding to events like we are. God knows what is happening before it has happened, otherwise God is not all knowing but still learning! This is why God was never surprised at the death of Jesus, why throughout his life Jesus knew he would die on the cross. Scripture call Jesus

The lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. Rev 13:8

The psalmist reflected on this intimate knowledge of us by God and said

*'O Lord you have searched me and known me
You know when I sit down and rise up
you discern my thought from afar'*

And again in another Psalm -

Even before a word is on my tongue O Lord you know it altogether Psalm 139:4

This knowledge of God is not a bad thing for us, it is a good thing. God knows everything about us but not in a 1984 'Big Brother' sort of way to catch us out. Jesus knew this and so he was able to say that God knew and cared about every single detail of our lives

'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him' Matt 6:8 and

'Even the hairs on your head are numbered' Matt 10:30

Because God knows everything we can be assured that he knows the very best things for our lives and we should trust him for the pattern for our lives, for he works wisely in our best interests, even when we do not know it at the time.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that some of the lost confidence of the church over the last century has come at a time when we have also lost something in our understanding of the Almighty nature of God. It will reflect in our prayers, obviously if God has no power then there is no point asking him to change anything! We only beseech people who have the power to do what we are asking. No good asking a collapsed building society manager for a mortgage, ask a building society with money. We only ask from people what they are able to give.

It is worth asking ourselves whether we have a God whom Moses worshipped in whose presence he took off his shoes for he stood on Holy ground, or do we have a God who is a father like Homer Simpson with whom we can saunter around in carpet slippers? Do we have a Holy God such as Isaiah saw, a God whose presence caused him to tremble at his own unworthiness, or do we want a God that we can feel able to understand control?.

Bible Study Isaiah 6:1

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Questions for discussion

- Do we have a picture of God which is sufficiently mighty?
- How can we prevent ourselves from reducing God down to our size?
- Is it difficult to think of God as both Father and Almighty at the same time?

Chapter 7

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate,

Why do Christians take the words and actions of Jesus so seriously? It is not just that we think he was a great thinker or moral teacher, the reason is that we believe Jesus to be none other than God himself. Christians would affirm that God can be perceived in creation, through magnificent works of music, literature and art. However God is known most reliably and fully in only one place, through Jesus Christ. This part of the Apostles Creed, the introduction of Jesus, is a most significant part of our Christian doctrine or belief. Jesus is the foundation of our faith, he is the truth which sets us free (John 14:6, 8:32)

Humanity

Having affirmed in opposition to the Gnostics, that God had created the world and it was good, there was no difficulty in accepting that God had taken human flesh. Jesus, for all practical purposes, was 'God with skin on.' We can learn a lot from the incarnation. The incarnation affirms creation. It means literally 'in flesh'. Christ took on an earthly body. This was sacramentalism taken to extreme. Jesus in taking human flesh gives new meaning to creation and earthly existence and bodies. God takes flesh just like any man. He shares the atoms, the molecules, cells and organs of humankind, the crown of His creation. He becomes a human being in anatomy, physiology, social relations and in every other way except moral culpability.

So here was Jesus born into a human family and brought up as a child with human parents. C. H. Spurgeon said

'Infinite and an infant. Eternal, and yet born of a woman. Almighty, and yet hanging on a woman's breast. Supporting a universe, and yet needing to be carried in a mother's arm. King of angels, and yet the reputed son of Joseph. Heir of all things, and yet the carpenter's son.'

Jesus came from the presence of angels to a cave filled with animals, from the throne of heaven to a feeding trough. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. He who sustains the world with a Word, chose instead to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl. Jesus was human, he had a human mind. From the Bible we see that he appeared to go through a learning process.

And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him...And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men...They found Him in the Temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions.' (Luke 2:40, 52, 46)

It is difficult for us to comprehend that Jesus, who possessed divine attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence, still went through normal human development. Imagine Jesus learning to read and write! He had the limitations of humanity.

Jesus also experienced human emotions.

Shortly before His crucifixion, Jesus said, *'Now is my soul troubled. . .'* (John 12:27)

In the story of Lazarus, we see Jesus express a broad range of human emotion.

'When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' He asked 'Come and see, Lord' they replied. Jesus wept.' (John 11: 33-35)

It is a mystery to us how, in Jesus Christ, humanity and deity are co-mingled. Jesus is clearly God and claimed to be on many occasions (Colossians 2:9, Philippians 2:6-8). Yet, he also allowed himself to be humbled, voluntarily experiencing human limitations-

He became tired (John 4:6)
He experienced physical thirst (John 19:28)
He knew physical hunger (Matthew 4:2)
He experienced physical weakness (Matthew 8:23-25)
He even allowed his body to cease functioning, as ours does when we die (Matthew 27:50)
He experienced temptation, as we do. Everything which we struggle with, Jesus too struggled with, he was completely human.

Divinity

Jesus was a common name and yet it was a name chosen to reflect the extraordinary purpose of his birth, for the name means 'God saves.' Jesus was born that God might deal with human sin and failure. At the time when the Apostles Creed was formulated the Church had not fully worked through the place of the Holy Spirit, but it was convinced about the divinity of Jesus.

This is where belief becomes difficult, because humanly speaking God cannot be both God and Jesus and Holy Spirit, what we now call a Trinity. Either God is three, or God is one, not both. This is where it is important to remember that to believe *in* something or somebody does not mean that we fully understand them. (Ask most husbands if they understand their wives!) When we say the Apostles Creed we acknowledge that Christian belief surpasses the scope of the human mind.

The Gnostics at the time, later the Arians and today people like Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims found it impossible to agree that God had taken human nature or a human body in the person of Jesus. Christians believe that in Jesus God entered human history and because of that we divide all human history into a time before and after Jesus Christ.

The word Christ is used which is a Greek word for Messiah meaning that Jesus is the anointed one. Jesus is the one in whom all history and the promises of God find fulfilment.

His Only Son

It is important to remember that Jesus is called the only **Son of God**. Jesus has a relationship with God which is special and unique. Jesus refers to God as his father in a special way and the Jews were furious with Jesus for calling God his father, for they recognised that he was making himself equal with God himself (John 5:18).

The Gospel of John contains the most explicit teaching about the unity of the Son and the Father and it worth looking at some of the things which Jesus said about himself.

- The Son knows the Father as the Father knows the Son 10:15
- The Father shows the Son what he is doing 5:20
- The Father taught the Son 8:28
- What the Son says is what he has already heard the Father say 8:38 12:50
- No one comes to the Father in any other way than by the Son 14:6
- The Father has given judgement to the Son 5:22
- What the Father has is the Son 16:15
- The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son 10:38, 14:10,
- To see the Son is to see the Father 14:9
- I and the Father are one 10:30
- Jesus prayed that his disciples should be one just as the Father and he were one also 17:22

Our Lord

As we have mentioned the simplest creed which appears in the New Testament is 'Jesus is Lord.' It expresses so much in a few short words. Jesus the man is also God our Saviour who demands from us complete obedience, who died for our sins. This word 'Lord' is used almost six hundred times of Jesus in the New Testament. In the Greek, the word is *Kurios* and it expresses ownership, the Christian has been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). To acknowledge

Jesus as Lord is also to accept our need for obedience. Jesus told his disciples that nobody could serve two masters Matthew 6:24

Born of the Virgin Mary

Up until now there have probably been few disagreements in our understanding of the Apostles Creed, but now Christians disagree! That the Holy Spirit was present at the birth of Jesus we would all agree, but how? Many Christians do not accept that belief in the Virgin Birth is an essential component of our faith and it must be recognised that many Christian denominations differ on their understanding of what this means. In this next section I would like to spend some time illustrating how some Christians can honestly disagree - some thinking Mary to be utterly holy and pure and never having had sex at all, let alone being a virgin when she conceived. Meanwhile others who think the idea of Virgin Birth devalues humanity, makes sex sinful instead of a gift of God, and makes Jesus only half human.

Roman Catholic Teaching

I would like to begin by looking at what Roman Catholic doctrine asserts, because it takes a view at one end of the spectrum. It includes belief in both the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception. In addition, it has adopted the beliefs that Mary's hymen was preserved intact during the delivery of Jesus. Although there is no mention of this in the Bible, this belief was accepted by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE. Essentially Roman Catholic teaching is that Mary remained a virgin for the whole of her life; i.e. her marriage to Joseph was never consummated, and thus the couple never had any more children. There are a number of ambiguous passages in the Christian Scriptures which some theologians believe contradict this belief:

Matthew 1:25: *'But he [Joseph] had no [sexual] union with her until she gave birth to a son...'* (NIV) This verse states that Mary and Joseph remained celibate until after Jesus was born. The word 'until', in its modern meaning, implies that Joseph and Mary actually consummated their marriage after the birth. However, the word 'until', as used elsewhere in the Bible, does not necessarily have the latter implication. For example: 2 Samuel 6:23 states that Michal *'had no children till the day of her death.'* That verse states that she had no children prior to her death; it also implies that she had no children after her death.

1 Corinthians 15:25 states that Jesus Christ *'...must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.'* This states that Jesus would reign until he conquered his enemies, it also implies that his reign would continue afterwards.

Matthew 6:3: *'Isn't this [Jesus] the carpenter?' Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?...'.* (NIV) There are also other references to siblings of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. Many Christians accept that these are other sons by Mary and Joseph; others believe that they were really Jesus' half-brothers (sons of Joseph from a previous marriage) or the cousins of Jesus.

Luke 2:48: *'...Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.'* In this passage, Jesus' mother Mary reproaches him, and refers to Joseph as his father. This verse is also ambiguous, because step-fathers were often called fathers in 1st century Palestine, as they are today.

Virgin Conception, not Virgin Birth.

It should be stated that the Apostles Creed is explicit in teaching only Virgin Conception, not Virgin Birth. Virgin Birth is a belief which says that about 20 BCE, when Mary herself was conceived, that she was without original sin. In 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed in his Bull *Ineffabilis* that:

'We declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which asserts that the Blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God, and in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from every stain of original sin is a doctrine revealed by God and, for this reason, must be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.'

To my knowledge no reformed denomination teaches this. Most faith groups within the Christian church have taught that Jesus was conceived by his mother Mary, before she engaged in sexual intercourse. Some Christians of a more liberal persuasion have rejected the Virgin Birth, and

classify it as a religious myth that was added to Christian belief to make the religion more competitive with contemporary Pagan religions in the Mediterranean region.

Many Christians believe that Jesus was the first child of many conceived by Mary and Joseph via sexual intercourse, as any for other human. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Jesus' "brothers" were in fact his cousins or close associates. "...the terms "brothers" and "sisters" are generic words that indicate a close relationship with Jesus, but not necessarily a kinship."

References used from the Bible concerning Virgin Birth are as follows

Isaiah 7:14 *'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'*

Matthew 1:23 *'The virgin shall be with child, and will give birth to a son, and they shall call him Immanuel; which means, 'God with us.'*

Luke 1:26-35 *'In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendent of David. The virgin's name was Mary...The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'*

Complications

There are passages in the New Testament where Mary and Joseph are presented as the parents of Jesus. (Luke 2:27, 2:33, 2:41, 2:43). Jesus is the carpenters son (Matthew 13:55). He is also the son of Joseph (Luke 4:42, John 6:42),

When thinking about Virgin Birth we should also remember that St. Paul seems unaware of it. He does not mention the Virgin Birth anywhere in his writings. It would seem reasonable to assume that if Paul had known of the special conditions of Jesus' birth that he would have mentioned them in one of his writings. In fact, the opposite appears to be true: he seems to have thought that the birth was natural and conventional: Between 49 and 55 AD, he recorded the first known reference to Jesus' birth. In Galatians 4:4, he writes: *'But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law.'* If he had been aware of the Virgin Birth, perhaps he would have replaced "woman" with "virgin", or made some other change to show that the birth was miraculous. This passage was written some 45 years before the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, and 55 to 62 years after Jesus' birth. In about 57 AD, he wrote his only other reference to Jesus' birth. In Romans 1:1-3 he writes:

'I Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and separated onto the gospel of God... concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh.'

The phrase *'of the seed of David'* implies that Paul believed Jesus to be the son of Joseph, because Matthew traces Jesus' genealogy from David to Joseph. The phrase *'according to the flesh'* implies a natural, normal conception and birth. It may be helpful to think more about the genealogy of Jesus.

Genealogies

It must be remembered that both Matthew 1:1- and Luke 3:23-38 give genealogies of Jesus which trace his descent through Joseph. Were these genealogies compiled by somebody who either did not know about the Virgin Birth, or who did not take it literally? Surely the genealogy is useless if Joseph was not the father of Jesus. Furthermore, the genealogy is to prove the Davidic line of Jesus to further his Messianic claim. If Jesus was of Mary but not also of Joseph, then obviously he was not the Son of David after all, he was adopted!

Virgin Birth myths

Those who dispute the Virgin birth draw attention to such writings as Livy, a famous Roman historian and say that the Virgin Birth may have been copied from a Roman fable: He wrote a popular book on the history of Rome that was widely circulated in the first decades of the 1st century. In it, he explained that Mars, the Roman God of war, fathered twins Romulus and Remus, the original founders of the city of Rome. Their mother was Silvia, a Vestal Virgin. Hence it is

suggested that Christian groups may have slightly modified this fable and adopted it as their own, in an attempt to show that Jesus was a person of very great importance -- an individual at least as important as the founders of Rome.

Others suggest that the virgin birth may have been copied from another religion

History records that: Buddha was born of the virgin Maya after the Holy Ghost descended upon her.

The Egyptian God Horus was born of the virgin Isis; as an infant, he was visited by three kings.

A Roman savior Quirinus was born of a virgin.

In Tibet, Indra was born of a virgin. He ascended into heaven after death. The Greek deity Adonis was born of the virgin Myrrha, many centuries before the birth of Jesus. He was born "at Bethlehem, in the same sacred cave that Christians later claimed as the birthplace of Jesus."

In Persia, the god Mithra was born of a virgin on DEC-25. An alternate myth is that he emerged from a rock.

Also in Persia, Zoroaster was also born of a virgin.

In India, the god Krishna was born of the virgin Devaki.

Virgin births were claimed for many Egyptian pharaohs, Greek emperors and for Alexander the Great of Greece.

The mythological figures: Hercules, Osiris, Bacchus, Mithra, Hermes, Prometheus, Perseus and Horus share a number of factors. All were believed to have: been male, lived in pre-Christian times, had a god for a father, human virgin for a mother, had their birth announced by a heavenly display, had their birth announced by celestial music, been born about DEC-25, had an attempt on their life by a tyrant while they were still an infant met with a violent death, rose again from the dead. Almost all were believed to have: been visited by "wise men" during infancy and fasted for 40 days as an adult.

The Virgin Birth and the Hebrew Scriptures

Throughout the Old Testament, we hear of the very unusual births of Ishmael, Isaac, Samson and Samuel. Usually prior to the birth, an angel appears to an individual; the latter is afraid; the message of an upcoming birth is given; objections are raised; and a sign is given. It has been suggested that Matthew and Luke could have replicated the essence of these stories, and added a virgin birth as proof that Jesus' birth was not only unusual, but was a miracle. This would establish Jesus at a much higher status than the four famous figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. Without a miraculous birth, Jesus might have been considered to be lower in stature to those heroes from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The virgin birth story was an honest mistake

In the Gospel of Matthew there is a reference to Jesus' birth from Isaiah 7:14. This has since become a famous passage; it is often recited at Christmas time. Matthew used it as a method of showing that prophecies in the Hebrew Testament were fulfilled in Jesus' life. As it happens, the Greek translators had made a mistake. When they were translating the Hebrew writings into the Greek *Septuagint* and similar translations, they converted the Hebrew word "almah" as the Greek equivalent of our English word for virgin. "Almah" appears 9 other times in the Hebrew Scriptures; in each case it means "*young woman*". When the scriptures referred to a virgin (and they do over 50 times) they always used the Hebrew word "betulah". So, Isaiah appears to have referred to a young woman becoming pregnant (a rather ordinary event). Some English translations of the text are accurate to the original Hebrew:

Revised English Bible: "...a young woman is with child..."

Revised Standard Version: "...a young woman shall conceive..."

James Moffatt Translation: "...a young woman with child..."

New Revised Standard Version: "...the young woman is with child..."

Revised Standard Version: "...a young woman shall conceive..."

Moreover the birth being discussed in Isaiah 7:14 appears to be unrelated to Jesus. It describes the Syro-Ephraimite invasion of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem about 735 BC. The child that was born to the young woman at the time was a sign from God that the siege would be lifted and that Jerusalem would continue as before. The prophecy was presumably completely fulfilled more

than 700 years before the birth of Jesus. For King Ahaz circa 735 BC, 'the birth of the Messiah some seven hundred years later would have been of little consolation!'

The other Gospels

The Gospel of Mark does not mention the Virgin Birth of Jesus and neither does John. John 1:45 refers to Jesus specifically as *'the son of Joseph.'* John 6:42 has the townspeople: *'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?'* If the author believed in the miracle of the Virgin Birth, would he have not mentioned it somewhere in the gospel?

All of this has left us with speculation, and this has been around for some time.

'The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.' Thomas Jefferson, 1823

More recently J.S. Spong, the radical liberal Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ, wrote:

'In time, the virgin birth account will join Adam and Eve and the story of the cosmic ascension as clearly recognized mythological elements in our faith tradition whose purpose was not to describe a literal event but to capture the transcendent dimensions of God in the earthbound words and concepts of first-century human beings.'

Historical Support

In contrast we know that Virgin Birth had found acceptance into the Christian faith by the early second century. Aristides wrote his defence of the Christian faith in AD 140 and tells *'God came down from heaven, and from a Hebrew virgin took and clad himself with flesh, and in a daughter of man there dwelt the Son of God.'*

Justin Martyr wrote his defence of the Christian faith about AD 170. In 'The Dialogue with Trypho' he writes

'the first-born of every creature, who became man by the Virgin, who suffered and was crucified.'

It is found in the Apostles Creed but also the Nicene Creed (381) and the Creed of Chalcedon (451)

There some who find the Virgin Birth impossible to believe but we must ask- why? One would have to say that Virgin Birth would not be one of the biggest miracles which God ever tackled. Luke would be correct in saying *'with God nothing shall be impossible'* 1:37. However there are sufficient difficulties to accept that some Christians will find the literal meaning difficult to accept. Was Mary an 'almah' as the Hebrew tells us ' a young woman of marriageable age' or a parthenos as recorded in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament?

Is the Virgin Birth necessary?

It must be recognised that for some Christians, the birth of Jesus in a natural way is impossible, because it shows him being born in the normal process of human birth. Of course for Jesus to fully escape the taint of sin which attaches to humanity, then the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception is more helpful, that Mary too came in to the world in a special way. Meanwhile for other Christians the fact that Jesus was born just like the rest of us is proof that he shares our full humanity. To accept the mythological passages from the birth stories is to devalue Jesus and make him less than human like the rest of us.

What is important for us to recognise is that the statement 'Virgin Birth,' means different things for Christians. This discussion of Virgin Birth is surely helpful for it teaches us that as Christians we must learn to accept that others will hold positions which are different from ours. Ultimately it may be that we will never fully know the answers to some questions in this lifetime.

Questions overleaf.....

Questions for discussion

- Do you think it important that Jesus was born of a virgin or that he was conceived without human intercourse?
- Do you think that it is important that Mary remained a Virgin?
- Does the Virgin Birth tell us that Mary was special?
- Could you have been chosen as the mother of Jesus? (*intended for female group members*)

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and was buried

Pontius Pilate - The historical setting

Pontius Pilate was Roman Procurator from AD 26 - 36. Placing Jesus in the historical setting of this man is interesting, for once again it reminds us of the historical roots of our faith. Jesus is not in our imagination but a real person who lived in our history and whose life is recorded not just in the Bible but in many other historical records of the Romans and the Jews.

What sources do we have which speak about Jesus, outside the bible?

Suetonius. The first non-Christian writer is Suetonius a historian who worked in Rome's archives and published a number of books on Roman literature, 'Rhetoric', the lives of Greek and Roman poets, and 'The Lives of the Caesars'. This work includes the life of Julius Caesar and eleven Emperors from Augustus to Domitian which covers the era of Jesus. He includes the lives of Nero and Claudius which covers the earliest growth of Christians in Rome and he tells us that there were Christians in Rome.

Tacitus. The earliest mention of Jesus is by the Roman historian, Tacitus (about AD 115), who remembered Nero's wrath upon Christians as scapegoats. He was a military governor who wrote a history of the German tribes, and a five volume history of the Emperors of his own lifetime. A later sixteen volume history has marked him as one of the greatest historians of all time. As a consul of Rome, Tacitus was well placed to know the official account of the fire of Nero and of the onslaught against what he called 'this superstition', a phrase used of a sect with fanatical beliefs contrary to the Roman state. Tacitus describes the Christians as possessing a 'hatred of the human race' meaning his pagan Roman society. He states that Christians take their name from a certain 'Christ', who had been executed in Judea by the governor Pontius Pilate during Tiberius' reign. Temporarily checked, Christianity immediately 'broke out afresh', and spread even to Rome, where by the time of the great fire it had become multitudinous and a matter of government concern. Here is an official historic statement concerning Jesus of Nazareth and the followers of Jesus Christ.

Pliny. The third Roman historian to mention Jesus is Pliny, governor of the province of Bithynia, AD 120. Pliny wrote ten volumes of letters mainly to his friend Tacitus, who was governor of Asia. Pliny also published the replies. Both men despised the Christians. Pliny was a timid governor and asked Tacitus advice on how deal with the Christians. He also wrote about the Christians to the emperor Trajan. He emphasised the Christians' loyalty to Christ greater than to the emperor. Pliny says the Christians will die rather than curse Christ and in their gatherings they sing hymns to Christ as God.

Josephus. There is also the great Jewish historian, Josephus, writing in AD 95. Jesus is described as *'A wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a performer of astonishing deeds, a teacher of men who are happy to accept the truth. He won over many Jews, and indeed also many Greeks. He was the Messiah'*.

He writes of the crucifixion of Jesus and says the *'tribe of Christians has still not disappeared.'* Josephus says Jesus was a rabbi and a miracle worker, who was claimed *'the Christ'*. He was executed by Pilate upon information from the Jewish leaders but appeared to them again on the third day and his followers are growing in number.

Each of these great ancient authors refer to Jesus and his followers as "Christians" who had this profound commitment to Jesus as King above Caesar. This is first hand, primary evidence from the decades immediately after the life of Jesus, in the work of distinguished historians who were personally opposed to Christianity and who wrote outside the New Testament.

Pilate was not convinced that Jesus had committed any crime (Luke 23:13-20) and tried to release Jesus at Passover, until Barabbas was selected instead (Matthew 27:15-26, Mark 15:6-15, Luke 23:18-25). We are even told that the wife of Herod was warned in a dream that Jesus was innocent (Matthew 27:19). Ultimately Pilate feared that his own position would be threatened if Jesus was allowed to live. Perhaps the most telling verse is John 19:12

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting,

'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'

In these short few words we are reminded of the historical reality of Jesus, we are also reminded of his humanity. Jesus suffered, he did not just put on a human cloak, but shared in the full depth of human emotion, including suffering. In the suffering of Jesus we are reminded that we have a Saviour who shares in the darkest moments of human life. It has been said that *'only the wounded physician can heal.'* The God who offers to heal the wounds of our sin has himself been wounded by sinners.

Was Crucified

The exact form which crucifixion took has been disputed by Christians. There are as a result many different shaped crosses. At the time of course there would have been no need to describe such details because crucifixion was a relatively common occurrence and everybody would have known. After the siege of Tyre, Alexander the Great crucified 2,000 Tyrians. During the Jewish wars Alexander Jannaeus crucified 800 men on a single occasion. Varus, in crushing the revolt in Galilee within the lifetime of Jesus, crucified 2,000 people. In Titus' final campaign in which the Jews lost their freedom for ever and in which the Temple was destroyed, it was said that he crucified so many men *'that there was no space left for crosses, and no crosses for the bodies.'* (Josephus, wars of the Jews 6:18)

The reason why Jesus had to die has been discussed and will continue to be discussed in detail. This course does not provide us the opportunity to spend large amounts of time in so doing. However it must be recognised that the cross has come to be the central feature of our faith. In his death on the cross Christians believe that Jesus brought about such a situation that we could find peace with God. How this occurs, once again Christians have made many different suggestions, many derived from scripture. Here are two -

- God punished Jesus instead of us and satisfied his need for justice
- His death was a unique demonstration of the love of God that he was prepared to die for us

These are just two of the ideas which Christians have considered. What we do know is that Jesus was not taken by surprise. His ministry reached a crescendo on the cross, which he had prepared for in full knowledge of what would take place. He freely gave his life believing it was the greatest gift he could offer. The cross assures us that there is nothing which God wants to withhold from us, he did not spare his own life. It is the cross which Christians

believe opens up new possibilities for us to draw close and know God, not just in a theoretical way, but with our hearts. Jesus makes a new relationship with God possible and we know that we can fully trust God because there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. The cross teaches us and shows us that we are God's friends and that he loves us. The love of God is beyond human comprehension, as Jesus speaks from the cross words of forgiveness, even to those who nail him to the wood.

When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. (Luke 23:33)

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think Jesus had to die?
- If Jesus just forgives everybody then why don't we all just do as we like?

Chapter 8

**dead and buried. (He descended to hell;)
He ascended into the heavens,
and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

This final clause in this sequence, 'he descended into hell,' is perhaps the most controversial in the Apostle's Creed. Indeed, some denominations consider it optional or refuse to include it at all. Its first appearance in the Apostles Creed is in AD 570 and it is not found in the Nicene Creed. It does not help that the subject is clouded by difficulties of translation between Greek, Hebrew and English, but also the fact that at the time it was written, the writer could not have been speaking literally because a three-tier universe is envisaged with heaven up above, hell below and earth in the middle. We now know that the world is not flat.

Dead and buried he descended to hell

Without doubt the Apostles Creed makes the simple point that Jesus was really dead. It was not an illusion. He died and he had a real corpse, that was placed in a tomb. He was not merely unconscious -- his spirit left his body and went to the realm of the dead.

We must remember that the Jews did not have a fully developed doctrine of life after death. The Hebrew word Sheol means 'the collective abode of the dead', a shadow land where men were ghosts, but with no concept of punishment. Sheol is not Hell and bibles which translate it as such are wrong.

Hades in Greek was also a place of the dead, the home of a person 'House of Hades' and Hades is mentioned in Revelation 6:8

When in the New Testament a place of punishment is intended, the word which is used is Ghenna. Jesus said

'It is better to lose your hand or your eye, than with your whole body to be thrown into Ghenna.' (Matthew 5:29-30).

'It is not necessary to fear those who can kill the body; it is necessary to fear him who can cast soul and body into Ghenna.' (Matthew 10:20).

Since then Christians have used the words of Jesus to create a feel bad factor. But what did Jesus mean? Jesus used the word Gehenna for Hell. So what or where is Gehenna? Ghenna is Ge Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. In that valley those who worshipped Moloch had burned their children as offerings. Josiah had stopped this worship and made the Valley of Hinnom desecrated territory. (2 Kings 23:10). It had then become the official rubbish dump, the waste incinerator of Jerusalem. It smouldered continuously and in it a worm bred and multiplied. That valley, a horrible place became the popular idea of hell. Sheol is a place of the dead, Ghenna is a place of punishment.

Hell then became our word for the place for sinners after death. The church has traditionally been guilty of creating a place for itself between people and God as a sort of 'fixer' with the divine, like a heavenly immigration service, it handed out passports to the deserving. Richard Holloway the Bishop of Edinburgh called this the 'theology of the crushed testicles'. This was where the church gained ultimate respect.

I feel particularly uncomfortable with the concept of a theology of hell which sees God like a Nazi commandant ordering people to be burned alive continuously in ovens. I find it remarkable that this doctrine still exists and can only wonder at how Christians can live with themselves and a belief in such a God. I am speaking only from a personal perspective of course, but I do find this to be remote from the Christ of the Gospels one who goes and searches for the sheep which is lost and forcibly taking it back home on his shoulders, whether it wants to be found or not. I would suggest that it is we human beings who in our dark

moments like the idea of hell, it appeals to our sense of retribution and anger. However we must not use the words of Jesus to justify this view and the sentence from the Apostles Creed has nothing to do with this kind of hell.

Many ideas have followed this phrase. There developed the idea of the 'Harrowing of Hell' Jesus invaded hell and destroyed the power of death and sin. The Devil was overthrown. Others believe that the descent into hell accounts for the problem of God's justice by providing an opportunity for all mankind--in eternity as well as in time--to hear the message of redemption from the Word, Jesus himself. To put this simply, it would be unthinkable that Jesus would not speak to anybody he met, wherever it was that he went, so he preached to them and offered the chance of salvation!

Some biblical passages might help us

For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. 1 Peter 4:6

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; 1 Peter 3:18

It was Clement of Alexandria who believed in a 'Universal movement and translation'. All people are offered the love of God. The sphere in which the grace of God may operate is beyond human limits. God has all eternity to win people to himself. This may be a helpful way to understand seemingly impossible passages such as Philippians 2:10
'That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

Conclusions.

Undoubtedly the main thrust of this phrase is to remind us that Jesus was fully dead. Yet, could it be that there is room for salvation for all from this work of Jesus? Surely there are no limits to the grace and goodness of God, either in space or time? We can only hope and pray that the grace of God continues to operate in whatever other world and whatever life there may be. It is to me a great concern to hear preachers proclaiming who will and who will not be saved. We have no right to state what fate will befall the god fearing worshippers of other faiths who have followed the religion of their forebears. Who can say how God will deal with those who through no fault of their own have failed to practice their faith like us. It is surely a human failing to try and restrict the grace and mercy of God, yet his love is wider than the heart of man. Who knows what other world there might be in which we might experience the unlimited grace of God, God has all of eternity to draw people to himself.

We must be less inclined to proclaim the judgement of God and more willing to hope with such great thinkers as Origen (c185-254) He suggested that the final and ultimate triumph of Jesus would result in the eventual submission of even Satan himself to the love of God. This is speculation only and perhaps for some, also a prayer.

Resurrection

One of the most common misunderstandings of Christianity is that it is primarily concerned with giving people a recipe for how to be good, or in the words of Dorothy Sayers 'How to be kind to granny and the cat.' There are those people who like Christianity because they believe that Jesus taught some wonderful things, like the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, however much we might like his teaching, if Jesus was not raised from the dead, then he was an impostor and a fraud, or dangerously insane, and our faith is an illusion. It was not the morality of the Sermon on the Mount which enabled Christianity to conquer Roman Paganism but the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

There have been many attempts to make sense of what occurred at the resurrection. The biblical accounts raise for us more questions than they provide answers. Jesus is raised and he eats food on the beach with the disciples. Yet it is plain that they find it difficult to recognise him and his resurrected body has changed to the extent that he is capable of passing through walls into a locked room.

However the resurrection is not something which we can take or leave. If Jesus was not raised from the dead then in the words of Paul, our faith is in vain.

Jesus told of his forthcoming death, but he also spoke clearly of his resurrection. (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:34, Matthew 16:21, 17:23, Luke 9:22). We can be clear on some important facts. The disciples were terrified when Jesus died, they deserted Jesus (Mark 15:50, Matthew 26:56). They were hiding behind closed doors (John 20:19). They were demoralised and afraid and then suddenly something dramatic occurred to change all that. The disciples proclaimed to everyone that Jesus was raised (Acts 2:24-36, 3:15, 4:10, 7:56,) Since that time Christians have been able to speak about the presence of the risen Jesus with the church. Not in physical form, but a continued presence which ensures that Jesus fulfil his promise to be with us *'even to the ends of the earth.'*

What does this mean for us today?

Think how hard it must have been for those disciples who had carried the dead body of Jesus. How were they to believe that he was truly alive? All of their hopes had been dashed and their dreams shattered. Now many of us will have been in the same situation, we too must believe in a God of miracles, who is able to transform our lives and enable us to rebuild the broken parts. We have probably all known death in one form or another, so too we must open our lives to God's resurrection power. In all circumstances of brokenness

- The loss of friends and loved ones
- The failures of our lives and the once great dreams we had
- The loss of youthful vitality and enthusiasm for a life project
- The chilling of a marriage or relationships which have gone wrong with children or parents
- The betrayal by confidants
- Our financial disappointments
- The appearance of corruption among those of whom we thought better
- The withering of our own bodies as we recognise how short our mortal life really is

In all of these things we must think of resurrection and the power of our Lord to bring life. The disciples were not expecting Jesus to be raised otherwise they would have been hiding behind the trees and bushes waiting for the tomb to be opened. But the resurrected Jesus surprised them. Jesus is not a ghost, he is really alive. It was at a time when they were all so low that Jesus met with them. Today Jesus is once more not to be not found among the dead but the living. He is alive today and quite capable of meeting with you and I, just as he met with the disciples.

Bible Study 1 Corinthians 15:13

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Questions for discussion

- What do you think happened at the resurrection?
- Would it matter to you if somebody found the corpse of Jesus?

Chapter 9

**I believe in the Holy Spirit;
in the holy catholic Church;
(the communion of saints;)
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life.**

I believe in the Holy Spirit

There is a story about a boy flying a kite. The kite was so high that it had disappeared into the clouds. A man came by and asked, 'What are you doing, son, holding on to that string?' The boy answered, 'I've got a kite up there.' The man looked up and said, 'I don't see it.' The boy replied, 'Well, I know it's there because I can feel the tug.'

That's like the witness of the Holy Spirit within us. We may not always see the evidence, but we feel a tug in our hearts constantly, letting us know that we are in touch with God. That is the witness of the Holy Spirit.

As Christians we have to hold together the following central elements of the biblical witness to the nature and purpose of God

- God created the world
- God redeemed us through Jesus Christ
- God is present today with us in the church through the Spirit, we can feel the tug!

The word Trinity is not found in the Bible, but it tries in human words to express the difficult truths which we find expressed in scripture. Clearly God is divine and we have seen that Jesus was considered to be the physical presence of God on earth. The early Christians then had to wrestle with how they were going to explain the presence of the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit was not just a warm glow, but nothing less than the real presence of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a helpful human invention, rather it is a somewhat illogical necessity forced upon us by what God has revealed of himself to us. There are many illustrations which have been used to try and explain the Trinity, ultimately none of them work! Sadly human words can never express how God can be fully one and yet exist fully in all three.

It may be helpful for us to recognise that God is Creator, Redeemer and the Sustainer of our Christian life. Nevertheless human words and the nature of God can never fully meet.

When we speak of the Holy Spirit we think of the life and breath of God which is at work in the world and in us.

The Holy Catholic Church

Holy. The basic meaning of the Greek word *hagios*, 'holy' is different. God is holy because he is so different and set apart from us. If we remember our bible study from Isaiah Chapter 6, this is one passage which seems to capture more than any other essence of what it means to be holy

And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Catholic. The word catholic has often been confused with Roman Catholic! The Greek word *Katholikos* simply means universal. It has been a proud boast of the church that it crosses barriers. There have been times when this statement has not fully coincided with practice and yet it remains as a great statement of belief. In Galatians Chapter 3:28 one of the most

wonderful passages in the Bible declares

*'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'*

Church Perhaps through no fault of our own we often think of the church as a building, however there is no instance in the Bible where this is the case. Indeed the church never possessed buildings at all in the New Testament period, they simply met in each others homes. The church is rather a group of people pledged to each other through their commitment to their Lord Jesus Christ. Now of course the church which is being spoken of here is not a building but a group of people, and necessarily an organisation. We are therefore proclaiming that it is God's people are different. There is nothing specifically religious in the use of the word church, which comes from the Greek '*ekklesia*.' At its most basic it meant just a group of people. It was used in Acts of the rioting silversmiths (Acts 19:32). However one thing which does come across clearly from the scriptural use of the word is that the church is very much about people. Jesus is the head of the church and loves the church (Ephesians 5:23,25)

Our faith is intensely personal and this is entirely right for we come to know that the love of God is shown to us in a personal way and demands a personal response. Yet as we participate in that love of God we come to know that we are called to belong to a body of believers. It is only because the church as a body of believers has existed throughout the centuries that we have been able to preserve the faith and communicate it to subsequent generations. It is therefore through the church that Jesus confronts individual people.

It is for this reason that it is a grave error to suppose that being a Christians can a solitary private affair, without the need to be a part of the church. If we were all to take that position the church would die out in a very short time. We are fortunate that the Christians church has enabled us to hear the message of the Gospel, we now have a responsibility to be the church and pass it on.

If we were to consider ourselves as individual musicians, then we would realise just how much we need the other instruments in order to be able to create music. Christians are called to belong to an orchestra, with other Christians supplying those other essential gifts which we do not possess in an entirety ourselves. Scripture uses such images as that of a body to make the same point. No one part of the body can exist on it own, it requires all of the participating members in order for the whole to function properly.

As the body of Christ it is the work of the church to be the hands through which Christ can work, the voice through which he can speak to our world.

*He has no hands but our hands
To do his work today
He has no feet but our feet
To lead men in his way
He has no voice but our voice
To tell men how he died
He has no help but our help
To lead men to his side.*

Bible Study

1 Corinthians Chapter 12 :1

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the

same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

The communion of saints

Bible Study Acts Chapter 2: 37

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

As Christians we believe that we are inhabited by the Holy Spirit, God lives within us. (Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 1 Corinthians 3:16). We therefore share amongst each other a very special gift. The word communion expresses this religious fellowship.

In most people's minds, the word 'saint'; means only those who are extra-specially good and holy, those who are awarded the title of saint, usually many years after their death. Each of them has their particular date in the Church's calendar, when we remind ourselves of their personal qualities and work for the faith, and link our prayers with theirs. The word saint in the

Bible should not be thought of in this modern day sense of the special individuals whose names have been commemorated by the church, rather all Christian people are 'saints'. In Ephesians 5:3, they are reminded that they should not be greedy, because they are Gods '*holy saints*'. In this form communion of saints refers to the special bond which unites all Christian people, since they form a part of God's family.

This can be seen from the passage from Acts which describes the early church at its best as they cared for each others and shared their goods freely. There was in the church a deep recognition of the need to help others Christians. When the Jerusalem Christians were in need the Christians of Antioch were quick to send help (Acts 11:27-30). Paul organised a collection for the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 9:1, Romans 15:25-28). In this way Paul demonstrated what the communion of saints meant, the fellowship of caring and sharing which should be the mark of the church.

This fellowship extends not just to those living, but also to the whole family of God, living and departed in the Lord Jesus. Charles Wesley wrote

*One family we dwell in him, One Church, above beneath,
Though now divided by the stream, The narrow stream of death.*

The writer to the Hebrews expressed this most clearly (Hebrews Chapter 12:1)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

As Christians we believe that we are able to enjoy fellowship with all of God's family, including those who have gone before us to be with God. Death brings fuller union with Christ, not less.

Questions for discussion

- How can we demonstrate the communion of saints ?
- Should our financial giving be concerned mostly to other Christians?

The forgiveness of sins

Bible Study Luke Chapter 15

The parable of the Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the most powerful pieces of teaching in the whole bible. For in it we see from the mouth of God how he views sinners. It is worth reading the whole of Chapter 15 of Luke.

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The

younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

The young prodigal was clearly at fault. He left the family without a care in the world for anybody other than himself. It wasn't just about leaving home either, it was about dodging responsibilities, avoiding work and having a good time. He wanted his money and he wanted it now, not so that he could go and learn a trade, set up in business and develop his own independence. The money was all about easy carefree, living. He is an arrogant young man who insults father (*give me what I could have if you were dead!*), leaves home to make his fortune (familiar enough then and now), and then hits rock bottom, especially as a Jew ending up in the piggery. He came to his senses in a sort of repentance, but it was hunger and need which drove him back to his father.

John Newton - who wrote the hymn *Amazing Grace* back in 1779 certainly identified with the younger son - the son who wasted his inheritance - in this way. As a young man he left home and went to sea - and there lived wildly and free. Like many people who abandon God, he was highly critical of the Christian faith, and spent much time tearing down the faith of the people he met as he went from place to place. It was only in later years that he realized that he had wasted his young life, and indeed not only wasted it - but in all that time he had been offensive to God and to all God-fearing people, and like the young prodigal, he repented and sought, in humility and in submissiveness to serve God for the rest of his days. His resulting experience of God's forgiveness, of God's grace, is not only described well in the emotion packed words of the song he wrote, it is also to be found in his epitaph, an epitaph he himself wrote shortly before his death in 1807 He describes himself and his experience of God this way: "

John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."

Indeed many people have had Newton's experience of the love of God - they have discovered no matter how far they have fallen, no matter what they have done, and no matter how intensely they have turned away from and rejected God, that God remains faithful to them, and indeed longs for them to return. They have discovered that God through Christ, indeed preserves, restores and completely pardons - and like Newton they rejoice in it and submit their lives thereafter to Him. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul Acts 22:3

Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

The Apostle Paul who had approved of the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1) went on to kill Christians. It was he who Christ forgave and called to his service, there is hope for all of us.

Sadly I feel that Christians have often been like the older brother. He was resentful at 'slaving away' whilst the other brother was out enjoying the high life, and how could the father welcome the little idiot back! The older brother would have invented the doctrine of hell with burning sulphur and the fiery furnace, just as we have accommodated it into our thinking.

On the other hand and fortunately, Jesus tells us that God is like the father. Jesus' hearers would have gasped at the image of the father running, a strong cultural taboo in that society. In another shocking gesture the father orders the son clothed in a robe, ring and sandals. Far from being welcomed as a servant, the son is restored to family dignity and given the signet ring to act with the father's authority. The son as a free person wore sandals, while slaves went barefoot. A spiritual that the slaves sang in hope of freedom went '*All God's children got shoes; all God's children have travelling shoes*'?"

For your consideration

Dr. Billy Graham started some trouble when he appeared on the hour of Power in America when he spoke at that great glass cathedral. He was asked about salvation and who was to be saved and the great evangelist put his foot in it, at least as far as the evangelical right wing were concerned. God's love is vaster, than mortal man can ever begin to grasp and it seems that Billy Graham a man who has seen at first hand the moving of God's Spirit - perhaps as much as any human being alive today - has drawn some conclusions from that. Dr. Billy Graham suggested that there was salvation outside of the usual confession of Christ as personal saviour. The simple fact which he commented upon was that some people would be found in heaven who had not believed on the kind of things found in the TULIP doctrines. There are Five Articles or Reformed points of doctrine which are commonly linked to the Dutch flower, the tulip - Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Essential to this doctrine is the belief that only some people are saved (limited atonement) the rest are punished in hell.

Christians clearly disagree over the extent of the salvation which will occur as a result of the death of Christ. We have to recognise that some Christians will agree to only a limited salvation, whilst others believe in a salvation which is universal. Scripture can be read in different ways, depending upon your position. An example might be seen in the following verse, which is used to justify both.

'For in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross.' Colossians

1:19

Questions for discussion

1. Who do you think will be saved and why?

Consider these examples in your discussion

- A child grows up in the jungle and never hears the gospel and doesn't know Jesus will he be saved.
- A child grows up in Queens Park in a Moslem home, has some zealous parents who teach him that Jesus was not the Son of God.
- A child grows up in a council estate in Luton, with parents who tell him that only posh people go to church

2. This impacts upon the Gospel message. If people are all saved anyway why should we embark upon mission, spreading the gospel?

The resurrection of the body,

Since the Christians believed that the body was good and creation was of God, there was no need to think of a destruction of earthly matter. The reign of Jesus would not bring about destruction but rather a rebuilding. Life beyond death was not some disembodied existence but rather a physical

Eternal life

One of the readings used most commonly in funeral services is taken from John Chapter 14. It is worth using it as the basis for our thinking about eternal life.

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God ; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.'" Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Jesus is speaking to his disciples shortly before he died and since he knew what it was like to cry at the grave of a loved one (John 11:35), he gave them some special words. Jesus would have known the beautiful words of Psalm 23

*'Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.'*

Perhaps they were an inspiration to him to think of life after death as living in God's house. Death held no power, no fear, for it was only a bridge to be with God. Surely there can be no better place for any one of us than to be with the God who made us in the first place. In a very special prayer St. Augustine speaks about the origin and the goal of human nature.

*'You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you'*

We are made by God and we experience a deep sense of longing for Him which only he can satisfy.