

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year B)
Sunday March 21st 2021

Today we will take our last look at The Creed that we say at Mass each Sunday. We believe that what we believe is making us who we are – the kind of people we become, the kind of things that we will achieve in life, for good or ill, all depend on what we believe.

We have thought about what it means to believe in the Father, and in the Son; now we proclaim our belief in the Holy Spirit: once again, we believe in a person, we place our trust in a person, we offer ourselves to a person. The relationship we choose to have with The Holy Spirit helps us to make the people we are becoming. All of the remainder of the Creed depends on the Holy Spirit – the prophets, the Church, Baptism, resurrection; these all flow from the life of the Spirit.

It is easy for us to imagine the Father (but perhaps not very satisfactory); even easier for us to imagine Jesus; but the Spirit is very hard to visualise. Here is my best shot. God wants to meet us, to engage with us, to encounter us: but he doesn't just want to observe us from the outside, he wants to be united with us, so that he and we are one, he wants to enter our hearts, and that is what the Holy Spirit does. He is what St Augustine called 'The quiet guest of our soul', he lives within us and speaks to us with great softness, a softness we must learn to wind ourselves down if we are to hear. C S Lewis also had a go at explaining it. This is what he said:

"Do not be worried or surprised if you find it (or Him) rather vaguer or more shadowy in your mind than the other two. I think there is a reason why that must be so. In the Christian life you are not usually looking at Him. He is always acting through you. If you think of the Father as something 'out there', in front of you, and of the Son as someone standing at your side, helping you to pray, trying to turn you into another son, then you have to think of the third Person as something inside you, or behind you."

The Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets. The scriptures, and the men whose words they contain, were inspired by the Holy Spirit. He placed his words into the hearts of people in order to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah.

And the Holy Spirit stirs into life a Church which is one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. Most people have an ambivalent relationship with the Church. At times it is a caring tender mother, but then occasionally it puzzles us, frustrates us, even annoys us. But on closer inspection it turns out that it is not the Church that does these things, but the flawed and sinful people who are part of it. The Church is the Body of Christ, through which God speaks his word of love and mercy into the world; from time to time sinful people manage to get in the way, to conceal that stunning truth, but that is not the fault of the Church.

We place our trust in a Holy Spirit who makes the Church one, holy, catholic and apostolic: even if it doesn't always feel like that. The Church is one because it can only ever be one: there can only be one Body of Christ. We know that the Church is divided and disunited, but fundamentally it is one. There is only one Jesus, so there can only be one Church. We bear a heavy responsibility to do nothing that obscures that. The Church is holy: can that be right? It doesn't always look holy or sound holy. But the reality is that the Church is the place where God makes his home, and so holy it must be. The people in it are all struggling and striving, we hope, to become holier, but the Church's holiness depends on God's presence, not on our personal holiness. In his earthly life Christ, the Holy One, sat at table with sinners: he still does, and his presence makes the Church holy. The Church is Catholic, which simply means that it is for all. It is not an exclusive elite, it is given by God as a precious gift for all people. There is no-one excluded, whatever their culture or background. It is a holy place for hopeful sinners, whoever they may be. And the Church is apostolic. It hands on the faith that the apostles experienced – and all of us who believe this are being made into apostles, people who are sent out to shout out the Good News.

I know I need forgiveness, and the person I am becoming is, please God, more and more a person who knows his need for forgiveness, and opens himself to that healing cure. The Holy Spirit breaks down our arrogance and our pride, our self-sufficiency and delusions of grandeur, so that we can be made whole.

The resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, we spoke about a little in the context of judgement last week. We do not want life to be definitively extinguished, but at the same time we do not want to live for ever: the thought of an endless succession of days is intolerable [see pope Benedict in *Spe Salvi*]. Eternal life is not an endless day after day after day: in eternity there is no decay, no change, so time has no meaning, it is a single and unending moment of joy and love beyond anything we have ever known. And eternal life does not happen just after death: we have already begun to experience it now, the seeds of eternity have been sown within us from the day of our baptism: already we stand with one foot in eternity.

And finally there is the crucial word, the one that we must say if we say no other: Amen, let it be so. St Augustine says 'He who says 'Amen;' writes his signature'. We take the pen and scribble our name at the bottom of the Creed. All that we have said about what God is like, all that this means for the kind of person I am becoming – yes, that is just so much what I want.

So, because of what I believe I will live in a particular way. I will live as someone who believes that life comes from the Spirit, who hovered over the waters of creation; as someone who listens for the Spirit's voice in the scriptures; who joyfully belongs to a Church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic; who looks for the resurrection of the dead – my own loved ones as well as myself, and joyfully expects a lively eternity.