

The Holy Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints

Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Pet. 2:1-10

Apostles' Creed Series

St Mark's Northbridge – 27/09/2020

Pray.

Intro:

Well as human beings, we like to gather together in different places and for different reasons.

If you think about it, there are so many occasions and places where we gather together:

In families. Workplaces. Schools. Universities. Sporting clubs. Choirs. Bands and music groups. Book clubs. Exercise and fitness classes. Community Associations. P&C's.

Political parties. Trade unions. Mothers groups. Boards and Committees. And that's not to mention all the different occasions when we come together to celebrate, socialise, or be entertained.

So what makes church any different to those gatherings?

The other day a friend said to me rather tongue in cheek that the church is just like a book club where people come together to go through a book. Except that only one book is ever looked at and only one person gets to share about it each week.

So what makes the church different to any other group or occasion when people gather together?

Well that's what we're going to consider today as we look at the line in the Apostle's Creed which says, "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints."

But before we dive in, it's important that we're clear on what we mean by "church". Because the word 'church' is so ambiguous and carries much baggage, which results in us having different definitions of 'church'. We might understand church as being the physical building that we meet in. Or we might see the "church" as being an institution with officeholders, such as 'the Anglican Church of Australia' or the 'Church of England'. Or we might see church as relating to the things we do in a service, like singing, reading the Bible, praying, the sermon, and the Lord's Supper – the things we do.

But what does the Bible mean when it talks about "church"?

Well the word "church" in the Bible simply means a gathering, or an assembly, or a congregation of people. And while this seems like a simple definition, the Bible paints a much fuller picture of what it means for the church to be a gathering of God's people.

So we're going to look at what we believe about church by going through those four familiar headings in your outline: Drama, Doctrine, Discipleship, and Doxology. And it would be helpful if you had an outline there to follow along.

Drama – How Can a Holy God Dwell with Sinful People?

Well in the drama of Scripture this idea of God gathering a people for Himself is a key theme. Even though our understanding of church is primarily a New Testament doctrine, the drama of Scripture lays some important foundations.

While there are many ways you could summarise the storyline of Scripture, a key predicament or question which Scripture poses is: How can a holy God dwell with sinful people? And this was picked up in the opening Psalm which we read earlier when the psalmist asks: who may live on your mountain Lord? With the answer being only those who are blameless.¹ And of course that is not how we are in our natural state.

- Scattering and Gathering (Gen. 11–12; Is. 49:6; Rev. 7:9–10)

From the earliest chapters of the Bible we see that sinful humans are unable to dwell with a holy God. And in Genesis chapter 11 we see at the Tower of Babel that part of God's judgment on sin is to scatter people – quite the opposite of gathering!²

Being separated and scattered is God's judgment on our sin.

But in the very next chapter in Genesis 12 come these amazing and well-known words of promise from God to Abraham:

*****SLIDE w/ Genesis 12:2–3**

² *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12:2-3)

¹ Psalm 15

² While this episode of the Tower of Babel can make for interesting sociological insights such as the invention of the brick and the development of human languages, don't miss the bigger point. God is judging sinful humanity when it tries to make a name for itself and arrogantly asserts its greatness without any reference to God. And God judges humanity by scattering them.

These words are breathtaking in light of what has just happened. In spite of human sin, God is determined to gather a people, a nation, for Himself. And the rest of the Bible is an outworking of these promises to Abraham. From Abraham comes this one nation of Israel and along the way there are individuals from outside Israel who are gathered in to God's people, before finally the gates of salvation are opened to all the nations.

And this happens through the Servant of the Lord: Jesus Christ. After rising from the dead, He proclaimed that his disciples would preach the gospel of salvation to all nations.

So when the Apostle John had his vision into heaven he saw a gathering of people – a multitude – people *from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb*. A holy God dwelling with humanity.

So the drama of Scripture testifies to this project that God is bringing about in the world: to gather a people for Himself through the Lord Jesus. To gather His church to Himself.

Doctrine – The Gathered People of God

So we now turn to consider Doctrine – what the Bible teaches about the church: the gathered people of God.

- Bought by Jesus' Blood (Acts 20:28; Eph. 2:11–22; 5:25; Rev. 5:9)

Well a good starting point is to consider how the church came into being and how it began. And the church starts with the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church came into existence because Jesus redeemed a people for himself.

****SLIDE w/ Rev. 5:9**

We see this in Revelation. In John's vision he sees and hears the elders praising Jesus, the lamb, and they say:

"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9)

So the church came into existence by what Jesus did on the cross. And this also goes to the ownership of the church. The church belongs to Jesus.³

This is an important corrective to any idea that the church is a human institution which began off the back of someone's innovation or hard work.

So when we believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints, we believe that the church belongs to Jesus and began because of His death and resurrection.

³ When Jesus was with his disciples He reminded them of this when He said to them, "I will build **my** church" (Matt. 16).

- United (Eph. 2:14–16; 4:1–6)

And this work of Jesus on the cross brings unity. Which means the church is a group of people who are united – united to God and to one another. We saw this in our first Bible reading from Ephesians chapter 2 where through Jesus’ death He has brought together both Jews and Gentiles to be one new humanity – a new people united together. A new nation. And this one new humanity – the Church – is reconciled to God. United.

So the church’s unity is not found in our race or gender or social status or interests or personalities or some other identity marker. Our unity is found in Christ and His work in uniting us to God.⁴

And this is where the work of the Holy Spirit is vital for the Church. For a while I’ve wondered why the Apostles’ Creed goes from saying that we “believe in the Holy Spirit” to believing “in the church”.

And that’s because the Holy Spirit helps us to see Jesus and His work for us. It’s the Spirit who convicts us of our sin and our need to repent, and the Spirit shines the spotlight on Jesus and our need for Him. So the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ to us by giving us the eyes of faith to trust in Jesus. And when we trust in Jesus, we are united to him. The New Testament uses the language of Christians being “in Christ”. We are united to Christ by our faith in Him. And since we are united to Christ in his

⁴ So in the church there is unity between each other – horizontally. And more importantly unity between God and man – vertically.

death and resurrection then we are forgiven and united with God – we are reconciled. Jesus did say, “...No one comes to the Father except through me”. And this work of reconciliation, of God uniting people to Himself through the Lord Jesus is the essence of salvation. We now have relationship with God. We now have communion with God. And the communion of the saints is seen in our fellowship with God and with one another because of Jesus.

And because we are united to Jesus then when we gather, He is in our midst.

So the church is United.

- Holy (1 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 2:9–10)

And we also believe that the church is holy. That’s the language the Bible uses to describe the people of God: we are chosen by God. We have been set apart. We are holy.

****SLIDE w/1 Pet. 2:9-10**

We saw this earlier in 1 Peter chapter 2:

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

So the church isn’t holy because it’s full of perfect and impressive people who have their lives sorted out.

No, the church is holy because God calls people out of darkness and into light. So if you are a Christian, then you are holy. You are a saint. So church is the communion of saints.

Which means being a saint isn't about doing many acts of charity or performing miracles and having a church body officially recognise you as a "saint". No, being a saint means that God has shown mercy to you in the Lord Jesus and your sins are forgiven. And you have been set apart to live as one of God's people. So the church is holy.

- Universal (Acts 2:1–11; Eph. 2:11–22; Rev. 5:9–10; 7:9)

And the church is also universal. The church extends to people in all places and is not limited to one group of people in a particular time or place.

We saw this earlier in Revelation chapter 5 that the church is made up of people from different backgrounds, nations, and cultures who've been redeemed by Jesus. And that's the heavenly reality of which we partake in our smaller local gatherings.

And since the church is universal, then we are in communion with other saints – we are in fellowship with other Christians all over the world.

And that's what we mean when we say that we believe in the holy **catholic** church.

Now this is probably that part in the Apostles' Creed which can make you feel uneasy when we say it. You might ask yourself, 'Hang on, aren't we different to the Catholic church?' Wasn't there something called the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago?

So why do we say that we believe in the “holy **catholic** church”?

Well we are affirming what the Bible teaches about the church being universal and embracing all Christians everywhere. That’s what the word ‘catholic’ means. But the Roman Catholic (capital C) Church understands the church to be ‘catholic’ because in its worldwide spread the Roman Catholic church holds the faith in trust for everyone. So in essence if you want to be saved then you need to go through the church.

But from our brief look at the Scriptures so far, it’s the Holy Spirit who brings people to faith in Christ alone. So it’s not the church as a body or organisation that holds the faith in trust in order for someone to be saved. Rather, the church is the result of people being saved.

So the church is catholic in that it is universal.

Well that’s a brief snapshot of our doctrine of the holy catholic church and the communion of saints.

Discipleship – The People of God on Display

So as we now turn to Discipleship and what it means for God’s people to be the church, there are many things we could say. After all, most of the letters in the New Testament are written specifically to churches or at least Christians who are in churches.⁵

⁵ Among other things, from the New Testament we could underscore:

- how God’s people are to hold out the gospel to a world that is dying – to proclaim the praises of the Lord Jesus as we saw in 1 Peter chapter 2.

But I want to spend a few minutes drawing out some implications for us as God's church based on a few pictures that the Bible uses to describe church.

- Family (Matt. 12:46–50; Mark 10:29–31; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15)

The New Testament describes church by using the language of family – that the church is the household of God. The church is God's family where He is our Heavenly Father – the Father Almighty. And as Christians we are His children and we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

I know for some of you church as family is a precious truth that you cling to. For some of us, family can bring up mixed feelings – both as we remember the past and experience presently. For others of us, becoming a Christian may have resulted in you being a bit more distant from your biological family. And still for others, maybe you feel the grief at not being able to have your own family for many different reasons. You see, our family situations aren't always the best.

But in God's kindness he has given us an eternal family that we are part of: the church. He has given us brothers and sisters, many brothers and sisters, many more brothers and sisters than we could ever have. That's what Jesus said in Mark chapter 10 to his disciples. That by following Jesus you don't just have the blessing of eternal life but

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- the consistent teaching and encouragement for God's people to not give up meeting together, especially as we await the day of Christ's return.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are many things that you could say about how believing in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints should shape our Christian discipleship!

right now you have more brothers, sisters, mothers and children in this age.⁶ And Jesus was talking about the church: the people of God.

So when we meet together as God's people, we're spending time with the family. Is that how you see the people you are at church with? Do you see them as your brothers and sisters?

The church is family.

- Body (Col. 1:18, 24; 1 Cor. 12:12–30)

And the church is also a body. It's the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians chapter 12 says that the church is a body with many different parts and Jesus is the head of the body. And that God has placed each person where He wants them to be.

I think this is important to remind yourself of. That you are valued and precious, and God has placed you in His church where He wants you. Sometimes you can question your worth and your place in the church, and your contribution to the church. But God has placed you where He wants you. To mix the metaphor, in the body God has placed you alongside other brothers and sisters who you can serve and be a blessing to.⁷

⁶ ²⁹ "Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29-30)

⁷ The New Testament is loaded with this "one another" language. That what we do as the church is for "one another", not ourselves and our own advancement. And during these times it's so important that we are looking out for one another, especially in how we are going spiritually. Maybe there's one person you might want to give a call this week or meet up with to check in with how they are going in their walk with Jesus.

And the body of Christ, the church, is made up of people who all bring something different. It's incredible when you think about it that the church is made up of so many different types of people. You see some companies aiming for diversity quotas and the like. But in the church, God brings together all types of people: older people, younger people, married people, single people, white collar workers, blue collar workers, rich people, poorer people.

Which means we all have something to contribute. We all have different gifts that we can use to serve each other. And we should delight in the difference and gifts of each member of the body. We should delight that God has saved all kinds of people, least of all ourselves! And we get to share in that rich fellowship and serve one another as the body of Christ.

- Bride (Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:1–10)

And the church is also the bride of Christ. Now I know for us men, this can be a weird idea. But we need to get over it and see the beauty of being Christ's bride.

As the church we are the dearly loved bride whom Jesus laid down His life for. And as Ephesians chapter 5 says, the church, as the bride of Christ, submits to Him. This means that as a church we must always be eager to listen to Jesus, to obey Him, to love Him, and to please Him.

So the true church is one which submits to Jesus. The true church is one where its leaders submit to Jesus. The true church is one which remains faithful to Jesus even when our culture is enticing us to abandon Him.

And of course, the church submits to Christ when we submit to what He teaches in His word.

- Temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21)

And the church is also a temple. In 1 Corinthians chapter 3 we see that as Christians we are God's temple where God's Spirit dwells amongst us.

And because God lives in us then this spurs us on to grow in holiness. As God's holy people we have been set apart to live for Him. And so the church must be committed to growing in holiness: our own holiness and the holiness of others.

So can I encourage you to take your holiness seriously. As you are led by the Spirit, will you make every effort to grow in holiness?

One way that we grow in our holiness is by meeting together and praying for one another. When we meet with fellow brothers and sisters we can be open and honest about how we are going in being God's holy people. And we can commit each other to prayer and encouragement to keep pursuing holiness.

I know here at St Mark's there are a number of you who meet regularly in prayer triplets or small groups to share and pray for and encourage each other. So keep doing that!

Because we as God's church are concerned about being holy. We are the temple of the living God because God dwells in us by His Spirit.

Doxology – God’s Gathered People Praising Him

So as the church of God it is only fitting to end with praise. The church doesn’t exist without God. And our praise of Him is both a present and eternal reality. Not only will God’s people be gathered around Jesus praising Him, but we do this now (Psalm 149).

And what Jesus has done in laying down His life and shedding His blood for the holy catholic church and the communion of saints is truly praiseworthy. What God has done in gathering a people for Himself is incredible when you think about how unworthy we are to be his people. We are not worthy to be in God’s presence because of our sin and yet He makes a way through the blood of Jesus. And for us as Gentiles, as non-Jews, the fact that God includes us in His people should always fill us with praise and thanksgiving!

So with the communion of saints around the throne of Jesus we too join in praising the One who bought the Church of God with His own blood by saying:

⁹ ... “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” (Rev. 5:9-10)

Amen.