

Sermon Archive 334

Sunday 14 March, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: John 3: 14-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



*I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth;
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under
Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead;
He ascended into Heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father
almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the
forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.*

I first came across the Apostles' Creed, Gestetner printed on an A5 piece of paper. The Rev. Samuel James Daniel McCay had printed off a set of them for some kind of study group and had one left over - for sixteen year old me. Sam and I had been meeting for some "about the Christian Faith" conversations - that eventually morphed into communion classes and the act of confirmation - where I professed my faith.

Prior to the Apostles' Creed my main reading and discussion material had been the gospels - a collection of weird stories about Jesus doing weird things, getting weird reactions from the people around him. Few of the stories ended with anything like "so this is the moral of the story", or "this is the point of the story", or "this is what the story means".

Whereas the Creed was like a list of bullet points - a concise list of things to be believed. And for a young man who was trying to build a "belief system", these building blocks were refreshingly concrete. Far from being stories that simply were told (with a pause at the end for thought), these credal clauses had a bossiness, an obviousness, to them.

In those days, at the local Presbyterian Church, the creed was said at the morning service every week, as part of the offering. I think the idea was, as the

congregation stood to make its offering, the creed explained why we were dedicating our money, time and selves. We weren't just giving our money away for nothing. We were doing it for a very clear reason: we were doing it because we were a people who believed. I do remember feeling saddened by how undramatically we said it - rote fashion - almost as if it were a perfunctory duty. I felt that our beliefs ought to be confessed with passion, with pride, with excitement - with a genuine personal commitment. I was a very earnest new believer.

I don't think, back then, that I ever would have imagined having a ministry in a church which hasn't said a creed in at least seven years - and that I would feel OK about that. I don't think I would have imagined that most of my preaching joy would ever come from sitting in that pause that comes at the end of simple stories of Jesus and his weird work - that I would enjoy the poem more than the commandment. But there it is: that's where we are.

The origins of the Apostles' Creed are a bit unclear. It's thought that its earliest use was at baptisms - where some kind of summary needed to be given to describe the faith into which the person was being baptised. It was a form of public confession. Later creeds have clearer origins. The relatively longer Nicene Creed came out of a formal church council, where debates had been held about particular theological issues - the divinity of Jesus, the structure of the Trinity, the sovereignty of God. There seemed a need, within the growing Christian community, to be clear about various matters - and to correct aberrant thinking. And although when debates are held, it's theoretically about clarification of an *issue*, in practice it's also about who's in charge - winning and losing, Alpha male making a personality point over Beta male, or Beta female, or culturally different gamma person. It's never only and purely an issue. When my ideas get enshrined in a creed, which we all adopt, I've won. History's never purely about issues. There are winners and losers. There are people who are right - and people who are wrong. There are people who are in, and there are people who are out. And a clear set of bullet points, of propositions, are useful in serving all that.

We put that to one side for the moment.

-ooOoo-

Among the many weird stories of Jesus contained in the gospel according to John, is this little encouragement statement about God loving the world. God,

so it is said, is to love the world so greatly, that "he" gave "his" only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. [John 3: 16]. It's not about condemnation; rather it's about saving, keeping, protecting - loving.

Isn't that nice!

But then, the gospel author falls into a bit of a condemnation hole. It's not about condemnation, but one group is summarily condemned. Already condemned, declared evil, are "those who do not believe".

I do not believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth; nor in Jesus Christ, His only Son Our Lord, I do not believe he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, or that he was crucified, died, and was buried. I do not believe in the Holy Ghost, or any of the other things on the list. I do not believe . . .

Two thousand years of faith passed down by propositions, bullet points, make me concerned about whether this is what's happening for those John calls "condemned". And unless I want to fall into sharing their condemnation, I'd better stick close to my creed, ticking my boxes as I believe, believe, believe. With pride, conviction, passion, like an earnest young believer, just believe, and try to suppress the little seeds of doubt and fear.

And let's put that also to one side for the moment.

-ooOoo-

I wonder whether there may be benefit in considering coming in from a slightly different angle. I stand before you, silent. I've not just now said anything - nothing with which you might agree or disagree, nothing you might believe or disbelieve. I'm just me, in my silence, standing before you. And you say to me "I believe in you".

Are you are telling me that you love me? Maybe. Are you expressing confidence in me, my capacity to be effective? Probably. Are you standing by me in my goals and hopes - saying that you understand my vision, share my vision. I think you are.

You are not ticking the box next to anything specific that I have said. You are

saying that I am on the right track. You are embracing who I am, and saying that you care.

Is this a better way of thinking about the "belief" that John describes when talking about those who have noticed God loving the world? Is this a "person face-to-face with another person" belief, in which the believer finds no condemnation?

And, as before, let's put that also to one side.

-ooOoo-

Earnest young Matthew is having his "quiet time" with God. He's not a guitarist, so quiet strumming isn't part of the deal - the way it is for more trendy earnest young Christians. Matthew's just got some time, a Bible, a brain and a heart. In the Bible there's this story about Jesus feeding a whole lot of people with just a wee bit of bread. Matthew thinks "Bugger! Do I have to believe this?" Can I manage to suspend that disbelief for a bit? I hope I can."

But he can't - so he ends up harbouring this vague feeling that he's failing at faith. Not believing, he is condemned.

Slightly older Matthew is having his thinking time, a revisiting of the old story about Jesus and fish and people and bread. How can he believe it? "Well", he reckons, "maybe when the little boy offers his meagre supply of fish and bread, it melts the hearts of others, and they realise that they too need to offer their food to others - until soon there's more than enough to eat. A miracle of contagious generosity. I can come up with something behind the scenes, not reported, that can render the story believable. Is that cheating? Still trying to reconcile himself to propositions, is he escaping condemnation.

Another even older Matthew hears a story - fish, bread, people - the story makes no sense. It never has. But when Matthew hears Jesus saying to those around him that they should feed the people, he says "you go for it Jesus. You can do it. I think it's wonderful that you care about the people's hunger". Then somehow, hand in hand with the Jesus he loves, he goes to the table to share his bread with a people of whom he has become quite fond. Together, as bread is broken, and something unbelievable becomes real, where's the

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