

Jesus prays that we be *One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic*

John 17:9-26 (11b-19)

Did you ever have a wind-up doll? One time my father brought home a little wind-up monkey that would weave around in a circle and madly clash its little cymbals. It was cute and we all loved it. My father kept that little wind-up monkey on the bookshelf in his office for years. It was fun every once in a while to wind it up and let it go. But it got old quickly, because it would predictably do the same exact thing every time you wound it up.

Sometimes I feel that way when we recite together the Nicene Creed. *We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty...* we're all wound up and off we go. Four times we *wind ourselves up* with "*We believe:*" *We believe in one God... We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... We believe in the Holy Spirit... and We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*" Then we keep banging out the words until the final line, *we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

I'd like to challenge us to go deeper than simply a *wind up response*. On Trinity Sunday in 2 weeks time we have the opportunity to go deeper in reflection on what we believe about God the Father. Through Holy Week, the season of Easter and this past Thursday on Ascension Day we've reflected on the mystery of what we believe about our Lord Jesus Christ. Next week on Pentecost we will celebrate what we believe about the Holy Spirit. Today, with Jesus' high priestly prayer for his disciples we're invited to reflect on what we believe about the Church.

We are in *Ascensiontide*, the period between Jesus' Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. And it is at this time in the Church Year that we see most clearly the Church stripped to its core. Jesus has gone up to be with God and the Church waits for the further mystery of God to be revealed in the gift of God's Holy Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles the Apostles are restored again to 12 as Matthias is chosen to replace Judas. In Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 Jesus – almost as if he were already the risen and ascended Lord – prays for just for the 12 disciples, but for the Church.

Picture Jesus praying for this church, this parish. Would he be standing in the aisle leading us in prayer? Would he be facing us from the altar? Would he be standing up front or kneeling in the midst of the congregation? Or would he walk amongst us laying his hands on each person? Maybe each of those images captures something of our risen, living, ascended Lord Jesus Christ who is among us, praying for us. In John 17 Jesus is praying for the disciples, but more than that, he is praying for the Church, for all who will believe in him because of the work of those disciples; Jesus is praying for us.

The four points of our beliefs about the Church that we rattle off in the Nicene Creed can be found in Jesus' prayer. *We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.*

Jesus prays that the Church be *ONE*. “*Holy Father,*” Jesus prayed, “*protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.*” Jesus continues his prayer in verses 20-23:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me; that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Our *oneness* with each other in love and our *oneness* through abiding in Christ and through Christ’s abiding in the Father, (our *oneness*) is the way we can show the world what God looks like. It is the way we can reflect God’s love and presence.

God help the Church, which is splintered into literally thousand of denominations. God help the Episcopal Church, which is fighting over issues of human sexuality and who has the correct interpretation of scripture. We can’t seem to help fighting one another and dividing. And yet **Jesus calls us to be one**. His life is in us all. His life is in those with whom we disagree. In Jesus, in his love, his name, his presence, his communion... we are one. We are one with the Baptists across the street. We are one with Congregationalists. We are one with Pentecostals. We are one with the Anglican Communion Network and other groups that have split off from the Episcopal Church. We are one with conservative bishops and we are one with liberal bishops. In Christ we are *One*. We **believe** in *One Church*. And, God help us, Jesus calls us to practice that belief in the way we treat fellow Christians.

We are *Holy*. Jesus prayed for the Church:

They do not belong to the world, (he said) just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth: your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

To be *sanctified*, to be made *holy* means being set apart. It is to be used for God’s purposes and not for common things. We *sanctify* or set apart many things. We set apart this building, these sacred windows, this beautiful organ, our choir, our hangings and vestments, the chalice, the paten to be used in worship to celebrate the beauty of God’s holiness. Jesus does the same thing with us. He sets us apart. Apart from what? Apart from the world. We – his Church – are to be used for his holy purposes. But we are made *holy* not by what we do, but by what Christ has done for us. Because Christ has loved us and redeemed us and made us his own. Because he has put his Holy Spirit in us. Because he has given us his holy Word, his Name, his love. We are *holy* through our association with Christ, not by our own efforts. Jesus sets us apart to be his holy people.

We are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world, and yet *for the world*. The Church is *HOLY*.

The Church is *CATHOLIC*. No, that does not mean that we are *Roman Catholic* or *Anglo Catholic*; it means that the Church is *universal*. In verse 20 Jesus prayed, “*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word.*” Jesus imagined the Church through the ages that would be established through the Apostles words. So we believe in a Church that is bigger than ourselves.

We believe in a Church that is part of what has gone before: the beliefs, the worship, the teaching, the governance, the sacred scriptures, the creeds, the great ecumenical councils, our long history as followers of Christ. That heritage, that *tradition*, forms who we are. As Christians we are not to act and make decisions without that heritage being a part of what we do and why we do it.

We believe that our Church includes the whole Anglican Communion. There are some 60 million Anglicans worldwide, the majority of them in Africa. We are part of that great Church. And we are part of that wider Church that bridges all our divisions. Jesus prays *not for these only* but for all. The Church is *CATHOLIC*.

Lastly, we believe that the Church is *APOSTOLIC*. Both Jesus’ prayer for his disciples and the reading from Acts witness to what it means for the Church to be *Apostolic*. The most obvious part of that is our intimate connection with those 12 disciples whom Jesus chose – including Matthias enrolled as one of the 12 in today’s reading from Acts. They started it all. They passed it on. They and those that followed them wrote it down. We carry on their tradition, their truth. We are among those whom Jesus prayed for who believe because of their word.

The word “*Apostle*” means *one who is sent*. “*As you have sent me into the world,*” Jesus prayed, “*so I have sent them into the world.*” A Church which is *Apostolic* is a Church which is sent, a Church with a mission. If we exist only for ourselves we are not the Church *Apostolic*; we are only a cozy holy club. Christ’s holy purpose is to redeem the world, to turn it inside out with love, to reconcile it with God and each other. We are his instruments in that awesome task.

We at St. John’s have adopted a vision/mission statement that lays out for us *how* we as St. John’s Church are called to live-out our *Apostolic* calling. In our vision/mission we proclaim:

St. John’s is a wonderfully diverse community of faith rooted in the heart of downtown Stamford, where the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a new humanity in Christ. We embrace this vision by welcoming all people to:

- Celebrate God in the beauty of holiness through the richness of Anglican worship and glorious music;

- Strengthen their spiritual journeys through prayer, study and scripture; and
- Serve as instruments of God's peace, justice and love in the world.

So, in our diversity, in our fellowship, in the new life that Christ has given us, through the beauty of our worship, through our Anglican heritage, through our ongoing Christian education not just for children but for all ages, and through our ongoing commitment of service and support of those in need both nearby in Stamford and far away as in the mission in L'Acul, Haiti... we are living out our Lord's call for us to be his *Apostles*, his *sent-ones* who are *in* but *not of* the world.

As Jesus prayed for the 12 Apostles in that upper room he prays for us. He sets us apart to be his Holy Church. We await the renewal of that Holy Spirit working in us next week on Pentecost. In his love we are *ONE* despite our differences. Let us claim our *oneness* and continue to work to overcome the obstacles that threaten – and all too often do – divide us. Let us claim our heritage in that greater Church, that great stream of Christianity, of which we are but a tiny part. Let us remember that while we are not *of* the world Jesus has *sent* us in it to reach out and heal it with his love.

Let us this morning and in Sundays to come not simply be wound up and automatically recite the creed, but rather *proclaim* with passionate hearts that: *We believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. Amen.*