

Preparation for Session 4

The Life of the Church

Core Reading

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity doesn't only affect what we know of God, but also our relationships with each and especially with our fellow believers. Early theologians, known as the Cappadocian Fathers, were the first to put this in clear form. They were Basil the Great (330-379), Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa (c.332-395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389). Realising that relationship, communion and community are utterly central to God's nature they argued that any understanding of what it means to be alive, human or divine, must also depend on being in relationship. It isn't just that we are better persons when we are in relationship with others, but that our very identity and existence depends on them. We are the shape we are, the kind of person that we have become, because of others. Dependence on others isn't a state of immaturity which we grow out of, but a constant fact about what it means to be a human being. Another picture which has been used to describe the Trinity is the image of a dance: each person has their own steps, their own part to play, which can't be played without the others also doing their steps. We are each part of the whole, not separate individuals, but called to participate in the life of God.

1. The Church as community. With this in view, the church is seen as a community of believers who are growing closer to God and to each other. We have been told many times that the Church is more than a building; it's people. But not just any bunch of people, otherwise we could gather for coffee and biscuits and leave out the praying bit of our worship! The Church is a gathering of people who have been forgiven by the work of Jesus and are growing closer to God and each other. So it should witness in its own structures and relationships to the nature of the God who is worshipped and served.

Leonardo Boff is a Brazilian, a Franciscan priest and a Roman Catholic professor of theology. His writing expresses the radical beliefs of liberation theology, and one of his finest books is called *Trinity and Society*.

The form of social organisation we have at present cannot be pleasing to God, since most people have no place in it. There is little sharing, less communion, and a great weight of oppression placed upon the poor. They are crying out for justice . . .

The Church is more the sacrament of Trinitarian communion the more it reduces inequalities between Christians and between the various ministries in it, and the more it understands and practises unity as co-existence in diversity.

The poor reject their impoverishment as sin against Trinitarian communion and see the interrelatedness

of the divine 'Differents' as the model for a human society based on mutual collaboration – all on an equal footing – and based on individual differences; that society's structures would be humane, open, just and egalitarian.

Belief in three persons in one God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is not just a matter of finesounding

phrases, or a wholly dark mystery, but implies a radically different way of seeing human beings as well as God.

- Jesus criticised the tendency of some of His disciples to think in terms of a hierarchy amongst His followers (Mark 10: 35-45). This is a very easy trap to fall into! Do you see this happening in the way your local church, deanery or diocese is organised? What can be done to resist the temptation? (*Remember each of us is part of this system – this is not just an opportunity to criticise others!*)

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2. The Creed speaks of the church as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

One Church: In John chapter 17 Jesus' prayer is recorded. He prays that that his disciples may be "one, even as we are one." He is praying that his followers will be united with each other and with God. The present day church is included as those who will have faith because of the disciples' witness.

Looking around the Christian scene today the idea that the Church worldwide might be united seems a forlorn hope. One of the features of the most dedicated Christians has been

a tendency to disagree with each other - perhaps because their faith has meant so much to them. Christians have not hesitated to torture and kill each other in order to establish their own understanding of Jesus' teachings. But there have also been many efforts to bring Christians together, which in the last one hundred years have sprung both from a desire to be united as the Gospel was preached to developing countries and as a reaction to the horror of the world tearing itself apart in two World Wars.

One of the fruits of these ecumenical conversations, assisted by the easing of communication between East and West after the end of the Cold War, has been insight into the Orthodox Church's understanding of this passage. For many this has been experienced through an appreciation of Rublev's icon. (There are many reproductions of this in Google images). It depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre (see Genesis 18, 1-15), but the painting is full of symbolism and often interpreted as an icon of the Holy Trinity. One significant feature is the openness of the group of figures and the apparent invitation to join in the circle of fellowship. The Orthodox Church has maintained belief in the capacity of human beings to be incorporated into the life of the Trinity - to be one with God. And as Christians are united with God they are, almost as a by-product, brought closer to each other.

To speak about the 'One-ness' of the Church is, therefore, to speak about the future as well as the present. It is both something to work and pray for now and the gift of God to be received in the future.

A holy Church: The Church's claim to be holy also seems implausible at first sight. One of the common objections to Christianity is that the Church, far from fostering the holiness and fellowship of love, has been responsible for religious wars, persecution and intolerance, as well as an abuse of power and responsibility, in the past and in the present.

Here are the views of two present-day theologians – views which are different but overlapping – on what we mean by describing the Church as holy.

1 Set apart: In ordinary English the term ['holy'] has acquired associations of 'morality', 'sanctity', or 'purity', which often seem to bear little relation to the behaviour of fallen human beings. The Hebrew term *kadash*, which underlies the new Testament concept of holiness, has the sense of 'being cut off', or 'being separated'. There are strong overtones of dedication: to be 'holy' is to be set apart for and dedicated to the service of God ... People are 'holy' in that they are dedicated to God, and distinguished from the world on account of their calling by God. A number of theologians have suggested a correlation between the idea of 'the church' (the Greek word for which can bear the meaning of 'those who are called out'), and 'holy' (that is, those who have been separated from the world on account of their having been called by God . . . (Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, page 488)

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God's holy people: The Christian Church ... is a divine institution. In its essence, it consists of those who are being conformed to Christ and united with him in a Spirit-inspired and energised community, whose internal fellowship and outward service and care reflect something of the eternal love of God. The Church is holy just because it is the principal vehicle and instrument of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the world. Despite its all-too-human

fallibility, the Church ... is the people of God on earth. It is holy because the holy God is making God's people holy. (Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Essence of Christianity*, page 150) The church, it would appear, has two natures. These might be described as a divine and a human one, or the ideal church and the actual. The images that are used to describe this are slightly different - it might be that the impure elements will be cut away and destroyed or that each of us is an unfinished piece of work and God will bring His work to perfection. The first idea has led some people to try to establish a pure church in this life, usually by getting rid of people they disagree with, the second has encouraged a tolerant attitude to differences of opinion and behaviour.

A Catholic Church.: The word 'catholic', as used in the creed, does not mean Roman Catholic. It comes from the Greek *kath' holon*, which means 'referring to the whole', its Latin form (*catholicus*) coming to mean 'universal' or 'general'. As the Church developed, so did

the way in which the word was used, so that by the fifth century, when Christianity was firmly established throughout the Mediterranean world, 'catholic' came to mean 'embracing the whole world'.

The idea of catholicity came under the spotlight again at the Reformation. Protestant writers argued that the essence of catholicity lay not in church institutions but in matters of doctrine. The Church of England claims to be both catholic and reformed – i.e. maintaining continuity with the teachings of the apostolic church, while having abolished non-biblical practices and beliefs.

An Apostolic Church: The basic meaning of 'apostolic' is 'originating, or having a direct link with, the apostles'. It does not so much refer to continuity in church structures as to continuity in faith and mission. According to McGrath, the use of the word 'apostle' in the New Testament has two related meanings:

- someone who has been commissioned by Christ, and charged with the task of preaching the good news of the kingdom;
- someone who was a witness to the risen Christ, or to whom Christ revealed himself as risen.

The Nicene Creed, in declaring the Church to be 'apostolic', seems to be emphasising the historical roots of the gospel, and the continuity from Christ, through the apostles, from generation to generation, to the Church today – the people of God who continue to do Christ's work in the world. The historical creeds are one way in which that continuity has been maintained.

There is clearly division between denominations about what 'the apostolic faith' actually means (for example, differences remain in areas such as infant or adult baptism, the nature of priesthood, the orders of bishop, priest and deacon, the consecration of women as bishops, and many others). Nevertheless, what unites members of the Church, faith in Jesus Christ, is far more important, than what divides them.

The Church reminds itself it is a body which is commissioned and sent out every time words of 'dismissal' are said, such as: "Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord!" This may mark the end of the formal worship, but it is the beginning of service in God's name.

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