

## 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023 – The People of God #12 ‘Catholic’ (Revelation 7:9-12, Luke 24:44-49)

Many years ago, I had a good friend at university who was a Roman Catholic. We would spend hours discussing faith and our different perspectives. We were both open to learning from other traditions, and a couple of times he came with me to my local church, which was Anglican and also evangelical in its style – very different to his Catholic congregation. Like most Anglican churches we said a creed regularly as part of our worship, and I do remember us standing to say the Nicene Creed before communion on one of the services my friend attended with me. As we got to the line ‘I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ my friend nudged me hard in the ribs as we all declared our belief in the catholic church – I turned to him and whispered “small ‘c’ mate, small ‘c’!”.

It’s something we used to banter about regularly, but it does get to the nub of an awkward question: what does it mean for us to say ‘I believe in the catholic church’ – especially if you’re not a Roman Catholic? Can the rest of us say it with any legitimacy at all?

Happily, I think the answer is yes, absolutely – and the reason is more than just whether we use a small c or big C when we say it. The word catholic literally means universal, and this is what also distinguishes it from the word ‘one’ we looked at a couple of weeks ago. ‘One’ church is about our *unity*; ‘catholic’ is about our *universality*. **We are united and we are universal.** The church stretches across the globe.

As I shared on our Daily Inspirations last week, the Church is a very big thing. *Very* big. It’s hard for us to get a true handle on just how many people claim to follow Jesus, right now in 2023. Think of a big crowd that you’ve been part of. One of the biggest for me was the crowd of 80,000 in the Olympic Stadium in London in 2012. That was an amazing experience – but, if current figures are roughly correct, the global Church is more than 25,000 times larger than that crowd!

25,000 London Stadia all joined together... that’s the true size of the Church in our time. It’s pretty hard to get your head around, isn’t it? Added to that, the reach of the church is truly global: today there is at least one follower of Christ in every country, even in countries where the Christian faith is underground and heavily repressed, and millions of followers in most countries. The bible has been translated, at least in part, into more than 2,000 languages, covering more than 90% of the first languages of the world’s population, and there are in total an estimated 6 billion bibles or portions of scripture in print. No-one keeps a precise track of how many are printed every year, but the bible is far and away the world’s best-selling book, by a country mile, every year.

Even in our church community, I’m thrilled that we have people from many different countries and cultures worshipping with us. In our congregation we have people from pretty much every continent, and for those (of you) watching online it is literally true that people are joining us from all over the world. Just that in itself is one amazing way that we really are a tiny reflection of what it means to be the catholic i.e. universal, global church.

But is our claim to be catholic just about size and spread? Impressive at that is, I think it’s about much more than that. Our universality is not just about geography and reach, but also about things we hold in common – things that we see in our bible readings for today.

First, let’s go to our gospel reading from Luke, when Jesus meets with his disciples on that glorious evening after his resurrection and effectively commissions them to take the gospel, as he says, ‘to all nations’ (v47). This is the great task of the Church, indeed it is what makes the church catholic in the literal sense of its universality. But note that this sense of one, universal church rests on two foundations:

**First, we share a common word.** Jesus famously opens the disciples minds so they could understand the scriptures (v45) – this was Jesus’ second great bible study that day after his conversation with the two friends on the road to Emmaus.

And the content is similar: demonstrating that there is a divinely-inspired message to take to the whole world, namely that 'the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and, [that consequently,] repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem' – every great movement has to start somewhere and in this case, Jerusalem was the epicentre of these world-changing events.

The point is: wherever the church spreads, there is a consistent message, a common word, what we often call the 'gospel', which means good news. The good news is that there is a Saviour, a special divinely anointed rescuer called the Messiah, and this Messiah has died for us, risen from the dead and now offers forgiveness and new life. Wherever we go across the world, any real manifestation of church has this message at its heart. The cultural clothing might be vastly different, and 2 weeks ago we looked at the bewildering variety of the church, even our home city of Milton Keynes. People are meeting in the name of Christ in enormous cathedrals and underground cellars, they might stand to sing and sit to pray, or sit to sing and stand to pray, they might have a big worship band or gather in silence, they might separate men and women or adults and children or be all together, they might wear their Sunday best or prison jumpsuits – but the gospel is the same. To believe in the catholic church is to share a common word.

**Second, we share a common witness.** 'You are witnesses,' Jesus says to his best friends – and ever since, any follower of Christ carries that same witness. A witness simply shares what they have seen and experienced – and we do, too. We all have a testimony of God's activity in our lives, and that becomes our common witness. We can all testify to the same Lord who fills our hearts, answers our prayers, and leads us into new life.

When I was 26, I went to Australia, and one Sunday while I was staying with family, I asked them if they could take me to a church. They are not yet believers, so they found their nearest church and drove me up to this tiny building in the middle of the Australian bush. I was 10,000 miles from home, but immediately felt *at home*. The pastor began by getting me to stand up: 'this is Matt from London, England', and even though I didn't know the songs and had never met any of the people, what we gathered round was both the common word and the common witness. What I brought to them was my shared experience of following Jesus on the other side of the world, and what they brought to me was that profound sense that, wherever I am in the world, I am never alone, because the catholic i.e. the universal church is there with me: I was at home among fellow believers.

Finally, and now we turn to our other passage in Revelation, **we share a common future.** John's extraordinary vision of the great crowd gathered round the throne is what we all have to look forward to. I don't know if you've ever wondered why we're all wearing the same? I don't think it's a uniform – at least I hope not, I'll be trying to personalise mine if I can! – it's rather that sense that our different backgrounds don't matter any more. We are all joined as the great united and universal church, worshipping our Saviour.

And John's vision reminds us that this great crowd is not just countless, but also from 'every nation, tribe, people and language.' (v9) The task Jesus set his disciples on that Easter evening is now fully and gloriously realised, for all eternity. And whenever we worship now on this earth, whatever our size of gathering, we are faint reflections of what is going on in heaven continually. In fact, sometimes it's helpful to imagine that great volume of heavenly worship joining in with us, even as we gather here.

**Worship is meant to be a glimpse of eternity.** Even here, even now. And it reminds us of what it means to be the universal body of Christ. *I believe in the catholic church* – with a common word, a common witness and, amazingly, a common future. May God grant us grace to embrace it – and may he enlarge our vision to engage with, and pray for, Christ's glorious, diverse body among all the nations. Amen.