

## 6<sup>th</sup> August 2023 – The People of God #10 ‘One’ (John 17:20-26)

How many churches are there in Milton Keynes? Go on, have a guess....

Would I surprise you if I said that I found a list of churches online, last updated literally three days before I wrote this talk – so, bang up to date – which lists 116 worshipping communities in the borough of Milton Keynes. Even if you allow for 8 in Newport Pagnell and 24 north of Newport, that leaves 84 within the city boundary of Milton Keynes itself. In fact, I know of at least two others not on the list, and there are new plants and start-ups appearing, and sadly sometimes *disappearing*, all the time. The true figure is probably between 90 and 100.

If you look down the list you'll see lots of names you probably won't recognise – if at some point you get fed up of me prattling on, here are some alternatives just down the road: House of Sozo church, Cherubim and Seraphim Movement Church, House on the Rock Chapel, Transformers Church (spoiler alert for your kids: you don't get to meet Optimus Prime there, thought you do get to meet someone even more amazing obviously), Mountain of Glory Church, Garden City Vineyard, and even Clean Slate Church, which I imagine is where all retired Churchwardens and Vergers want to go – a church where all the slates are clean!

I jest – and please don't think me disrespectful, I know one or two of those churches personally and they do amazing work, they are filled with his Spirit and God has blessed their ministry. But it's a reminder that even in one medium-sized city we encounter the bewildering variety of the kingdom of God. Across the world it is estimated there are 20,000 church denominations and thousands or even tens of thousands more individual churches with no denomination, all shining their light in their community. One of the questions I get asked regularly by people is: how are all of these churches different? What distinguishes them from this church, or the next-door church? Why are they doing their own thing at all? Does it even matter?

So let me go back to the original question, and get us to think about it another way. **How many churches are there in Milton Keynes? What if the answer is.... ONE.** There is just one church; there are lots of varieties of this one church, but it's ONE church. Like a box of chocolates, it is *one* box with lots of different flavours. We love some, we like others, we're not so keen on the orange creams – but there's something for everyone. Also, like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get when you go through the door of a church for the first time, but that's a talk for a different occasion.

Today we begin the last part of our big summer series on being the people of God. In June, we thought about our identity as told by the story of scripture: the people of God are chosen, redeemed, challenged and blessed. In July, we looked at the most important images for the church as found in the New Testament: the church (i.e. the people of God) are a family, a body, a temple (where God lives), a bride (waiting for the divine groom) and a light, shining in the dark places of the world.

This month, we go back to the Nicene Creed, one of the early declarations of faith (in the 4<sup>th</sup> century) which pretty much the whole church at the time signed up to, and which, even now, most mainline expressions of church use in their worship on a regular basis. In this Creed, we declare the following: **'I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.'**

One, holy, catholic and apostolic – this is the theological understanding of church, the four marks of what church is. And over these four weeks we'll look at each word in turn, and ask ourselves, what does it mean for the church to be holy? Catholic? Apostolic? And this week, ONE?

First, a quick historical aside. The first universal creed was the Apostles Creed in 325AD. In this creed (which we use in our Simple Sunday Communion at both St Mary's and All Saints), the church is described as 'the holy, catholic Church'. By 381AD, the Nicene Creed had added 'one' and 'apostolic' – in other words, these particular words were felt to be so important they had to be included in the updated version fifty years later. Why?

At this point a quick tribute to St Athanasius is necessary. Athanasius is the most important figure in church history you've never heard of (or at least most people, anyway). In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the church was split over all kinds of debates, especially over the nature of the Trinity. Athanasius was Bishop of Alexandria (on the coast of Egypt) for 45 years, and spent his life pulling the Church back together, persuading people to go back to the apostles and the witness of the New Testament and adopt what we now see as the basics of the Christian faith.

His witness was costly: he was hated by numerous Roman Emperors, was exiled no less than five times during his long life, and his nickname was 'Athanasius against the world'. But, thanks to him, probably more than anyone else, 12 years after his death, the council at Nicaea agreed the creed which has become pretty much the standard declaration of faith. Nevertheless, the challenges the church faced in the 4<sup>th</sup> century mean that, when the church leaders gathered in 381AD to agree the creed, they realised how important it was to add two words to 'holy, catholic Church': the word 'apostolic' i.e. founded on the witness of the first generation of apostles who wrote the New Testament – and also 'one'.

**In other words, despite our differences, we are one.** Just as Jesus said in his great prayer in John 17 – and apologies that it's taken a bit longer to get to the heart of our passage today – 'My prayer... is that all of them may be *one*, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.' (v21)

Many scholars believe that John was written late in the first century; but the New Testament letters make it clear that this understanding that, however many small groups met locally they were all part of one bigger entity, dates to the first generation of Jesus' followers. St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in the mid-50s AD refers to the 'church of God' i.e. one entity that Paul was ashamed to have persecuted (15:9). In Ephesians a few years later, Paul goes further, declaring: 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' (4:4-6)

I use the same words even now when I welcome a newly baptised adult or child into the church.

**Wherever we worship, whatever differences we might have, we are one.** We are one because we have all been saved by the same gospel, the gospel of Christ. We have all joined his body, we are all part of his one, redeemed humanity. Whatever sometimes divides, what unites us is so much greater.

(Online) Wherever you sit today as you watch this service and worship, we are all part of one body. Yes, we all know Jesus personally, and we will all have our preferences: modern songs or old hymns; priests or pastors, Mass or Lord's supper, believers' baptism or children as well, St Mary's or All Saints or Christ the King, or Church Without Walls, or Transformers, Clean Slate, Cherubim and Seraphim, House on the Rock, Quakers, Salvationist, Baptist, Methodist, Reformed, Catholic, Orthodox or Anglican. **But we are one – and being one is part of our witness.** Note what Jesus prays about the outcome of real unity: 'then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.' (v23) This is not just about theology, it is about witness and mission as well. We are called to bring others into this one body, the body of Christ.

I find this stuff hard – and I'm sure most of you do too. I like my little corner, my little preferences. So, let's all pray this week for a fresh revelation, a bigger understanding of the unity of the church. I believe in ONE church – may God grant me grace to honour it, as I honour Christ. Amen.