

17th August 2025, Reflection – The Creed (10): ‘The Church and the Communion of the Saints’

In my study I have a small paperweight (here it is: SHOW). Alise gave it to me about 20 years ago, and in it, it says this: ‘The local church is the hope of the world.’ (REPEAT) It’s a small object, of no monetary value, but it’s very precious to me. It’s the quote of a well-known church leader and summarises what sits in my heart as a fundamental part of how I see life, indeed what I’ve devoted my energies to for all these years: **the local church is the hope of the world.**

And yes, I’ve heard it critiqued over the years – usually the comment is: surely *Jesus* is the hope of the world?! And yes, of course that’s true. *Jesus* is the hope of the world. But how does the hope of Jesus find expression? How is it embodied in the world? Through his body – the church. In particular, through countless communities of believers, each reflecting the love, mercy, power and hope of Jesus to their neighbourhood, their workplace, their families and friends. I do believe that this is a phrase that Jesus would agree with, put his name to, if you will: the local church is the hope of the world.

Today we get to the tenth in our big series on the Creed. (If you’re watching online, it’s the last in our series, as next week my sabbatical starts, though we’ve got two more weeks in person.) And this is our line for today: ‘I believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of saints.’ Two summers ago we looked in detail at what we really mean by ‘the holy catholic church’: ‘holy’ means set apart and ‘catholic’ means universal; both of these ideas got a whole sermon to themselves – but they can effectively be summarised by the next phrase, which is the one people tend to scratch their heads over, so I’m going to focus on that one today: ‘the communion of saints.’ What does that mean? And why does it matter?

Although we now use the word communion to describe an important ceremony involving bread and wine to remember Jesus, that’s *not* what is meant here. Sharing bread and wine definitely forms an important way of expressing what this phrase means, but actually the idea is way bigger than that – and we lose its power if we don’t keep the bigger definition in mind. And this is it:

The communion of saints refers to the spiritual bond that connects all believers in Christ, both living and dead, as one body under Christ as their head. (REPEAT)

Let’s unpack that: the word ‘communion’ means a deep shared unity i.e. everything we have in common as followers of Jesus. The word ‘saint’ is just the New Testament word for all followers of Jesus (not saints with a capital S, the special ones, but all Christians.) So, put those ideas together, and **the communion of saints is our deep shared unity as one global body of believers in Jesus.**

Or, as St Paul summarises for us quite helpfully in the book of Ephesians: to be one body means we have ‘one Spirit, one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all.’ We have the same divine parent, the same Spirit of Jesus empowering us, the same faith on which our life stands, and the same hope – the same direction in life from this point, and indeed beyond this life into eternity. We may have our differences, but as followers of Jesus what unites us is always so much more than what divides us.

So, what does this deep unity, this communion of saints look like in practice? Before we go into our passages, let’s observe that **it’s both global and local.** Fundamentally, it is something that reaches across the world – I’ve been fortunate to worship in the bush in Australia, in a cathedral in Tanzania and also in a hut with no roof a few miles from that cathedral, at high mass in Spain – and in dozens of churches in this country – and wherever I go I worship the same Jesus with a great bunch of people who want to worship with me. Isn’t that amazing? But the fact that whenever I do that, I join a *particular* body of people, worshipping and serving Jesus in a *particular* place, means that for most of us, **the communion of saints expresses itself in a very specific way – it is embodied in one community.**

We might be the Church Militant across the world – to use the old Prayer Book language! – and one day we'll be the countless multitude of the Church Triumphant (a glimpse of which we saw in our passage from Revelation): that is our shared future, hallelujah! But now, in this life, at this moment in time, we express our communion in a particular body of saints. The local church is the hope of the world.

So, let's go to the book of Acts and that lovely short passage and see what the communion of saints looks like in practice: **first, it tells us that all the believers were 'one in heart and mind'**. Both words matter here: one mind means a shared vision – they saw life through a similar lens and articulated their faith in a united way. But they also had one heart – not just a shared vision, but shared values. They practised love and peace and patience and gentleness. Vision without values is impressive but cold – breadth without depth; values without vision is supportive but pedestrian – depth without breadth. Both together are dynamite – one heart and one mind. (ADD HERE)

Second, it tells us that 'they shared everything'. And let's note that this is not just time and support, it's practical – they shared resources, they shared money and possessions. Perhaps the greatest hallmark of the early church was its radical generosity. 'Spiritual' communion isn't worth much if it doesn't make a practical difference to your fellow believers' lives. And it doesn't have to be selling land or houses – we give what we can, as Jesus taught. But however little it is, it does need to be real, it needs to be *actual* help. As St James observed, it's not much use praying for someone to be fed and clothed unless someone actually gives them food and clothing.

Finally, it tells us that **our communion is built on 'the resurrection of the Lord Jesus'**. This was the heart of the message, but also the source of our shared hope. The resurrection of Christ proves that Jesus is who he said he was; it empowers us to know the abundant life of God; it is the prelude to the pouring out of the Spirit; and it paves the way for our future home in glory.

The resurrection of Christ provides the true perspective for our communion as saints. It keeps us looking outwards, it fixes our eyes both up and forwards (and not down and backwards), and it engages us in worship. It's no surprise that, freed from all the other challenges of life, the global family of Christ which St John glimpses in heaven dedicates itself to worship. Indeed, unless we keep adoring the resurrected Christ, I don't think we can do the other things well – stay one in heart and mind, and keep being radically generous.

As I draw the threads together, this is my last Sunday before I take my extended break, for three months on sabbatical. And I'm so pleased that I can finish with this theme, I couldn't ask for a better topic to preach my heart to you all one last time, at least for a while. **What does 'the communion of saints' mean to me? It means that the local church is the hope of the world.** As I step back for three months, let this idea of the communion of saints be your guide and inspiration. See it as an opportunity. All you need is in this lovely short passage of Acts: be of one heart and mind, serve practically and practise generosity, and make sure to keep worshipping and adoring the risen Lord Jesus.

If you do that, you won't go far wrong.

Amen.