

26th October 2017

The Communion of Saints

Last Sunday I preached on the phrase found in the fourth century (AD) Apostle's Creed: *the communion of saints*. Since then I have been asked to write a summary of what I said so people can further reflect as they would wish. Of course, most of our sermons also end up online www.swac.church.

Defining the terms

Language is always evolving and often assumes usage beyond its original intention. We need to define our terms carefully. *Sainthood* in the Roman Catholic and Eastern traditions is used to distinguish a few extraordinary people from that of the ordinary believer. This is not biblical. Rather, in the Bible, sainthood is a unifying term that described anyone who belongs to the Lord. Derived from the Greek term *hagios*, which can also be translated *holy ones*, it is applied to everyone who belongs to the Lord (in fact objects and vessels in the Old Testament can be described as 'holy', i.e. 'saintly'). So, Paul writes in Ephesians 3:17-18

I pray that you...may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.

This is a prayer for every believer – every saint!

Now what about the term *communion*? Communion in this context, simply means a community. So, the communion of saints might be expressed more colloquially in the phrase: community of believers. It is in this sense, we declare, along with the historic church, that we believe in the communion of saints.

How to belong

Belonging to Christian community is more important than anyone of us realise. Western culture tends towards individualism, but the gospel invites us to into a transformational community. It is therefore vital that we learn to belong to this community in a Jesus way – in a way that recognises that it is God's gift to us. In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us against imposing our own ideals (no matter how Christian they may appear to us) upon our church family:

Christian community is not an ideal which we must realise; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.

What Bonhoeffer is warning us against is an approach to church in which we see ourselves as the solution and the answer. We like to think we are God's gift to his church, but the truth is the church is God's gift to us. This is a subtle distinction, but an important one, for there are many in church life who simply don't know how to belong. We tend to be critical or get frustrated when our ideas are not implemented. Or we are sensitive to criticism and seek affirmation all the time. You may have a biblical picture of what your church should

look like but this should compel you to prayer and kindness and hidden acts of service, not frustration, judgement, and sensitivity. Bonhoeffer goes on to say:

He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial...He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly.

The communion of saints teaches us that we stand on holy ground when we encounter the community of believers, and rather than rush in, we should take off our sandals and approach with awe.

Self-surrender

In John 17:20-26, Jesus prays that we would belong in Christian community as 'one' – in complete unity. This does not mean uniformity or even conformity, rather this 'oneness' Jesus says, is based upon the oneness of the triune God who as an eternal being has always been other-person centred – God is love. The different persons of the Trinity have been eternally honouring, affirming and surrendering themselves to one another in love. You need difference and diversity in order to love, for love is self-surrender to another.

In his book *Leading a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, Mark Deymaz offers three principles that we must embrace in light of Jesus' prayer:

1. *Surrendering our preferences*: we give up our personal preferences.
2. *Extending ourselves to others*: we actively seek out diversity of people.
3. *Not being dogmatic*: we reject rigidity and inflexibility which destroys community.

I believe there is something very beautiful about our church family. God has placed us in a vibrant and diverse city to witness to God's oneness by being a community of self-surrender. Jesus said that the world will know God's love by witnessing ours. In our church we have some 10 nationalities represented; we are from various church traditions; and we span the whole spectrum of ages. God has given us difference, so we can show his unity in love.

There will always be the temptation towards individual preference and a fear of difference. In fact, we are faced with particular challenges in modern day Australia with the rise of secularism, rapid changes in technology and communication, and of course globalisation itself. And yet we have the resources in Jesus' prayer to choose self-surrender rather than self-insulation. After all, we believe in the communion of saints.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the God who is love.

Scott