

## **Without vision, the people perish**

*sermon preached on Easter Day, 2018  
The Methodist Church in Wellesbourne*

Easter is a hinge. It signifies very definitely the end of one thing, one phase, even one world, and the beginning of something entirely new. It is the pivot on which the life of the universe turns.

Easter is laden with new possibilities. It is the feast of potential, and for that reason there is an element of uncertainty. The resurrection is so revolutionary that the past has ceased to be a good guide for the future.

As a congregation, a Circuit, a Connexion, we also find ourselves at a pivotal point - the realisation that certain familiar ways of doing things are coming to an end, and the (uncertain) hope of new beginnings.

In the midst of all this change and uncertainty, we need a vision, a vision that is only possible because of Easter. The Psalmist says that without vision, the people perish! But visions are not answers to our problems. They give us glimpses of God's future, and inspire and encourage us to keep going, even when the way is unclear.

The vision for the church I offer here is not new. In fact, it was written about 1700 years ago in an attempt to unify Christians: 'I believe in the one, holy, catholic and



apostolic church.' I also offer a visual aid to reflect upon during the sermon: Andrei Rublev's Icon depicting the visitation at Mamre.

### ONE

For any of us, dividing our lives into the personal and the public, the sacred and secular, work and life, is not easy. As you know, I work from home, or rather from the Manse. It is never easy to make firm lines between work and rest. When I listen to the problems of a friend, am I being me or being a minister?

A proper vision for the Church can only be articulated when we try to hold all things together. So if we struggle to separate out the sacred and the secular in our

personal lives, or make distinctions between 'church' and 'world', that is probably what was intended.

So part of the vision of the Church is a community that offers people the chance of wholeness, of trying to hold together the various parts of their increasingly fragmented lives and then making some sense of it in the light of the gospel. And that means bringing the **WHOLE** of life into church, not a sanitized version of it. I don't want to be part of a church (and yet I fear I am!) that judges and pre-judges people, that has decided in advance the criteria for membership and looks down its nose at those who don't meet them. I want to be part of a church that stops avoiding the difficult issues, for fear they might upset people. How can we possibly find wholeness if we hide, or force others to hide, parts of their lives in church? The journey to wholeness, to Oneness, is a painful one because we have to put everything on the table, including our fears and our prejudices.

There can be no unity without truth, no wholeness without honesty.

One ... HOLY

'There is no holiness but social holiness.' So said John Wesley, and part of Methodism's mission still today is to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.

But holy has two meanings:

The first is about wholeness, about completion. So we talk of the saints as the holy ones, not because they are better than us, but because they have completed the journey of faith. There is an incompleteness about our life, and so we are all still on the way to being holy. But only because God is holy, and our completeness is found in being one with God.

The second sense is much more about being set apart for use, about vocation. The church itself is that community formed by calling, those 'called out'. But called out not to become a holy huddle, locked away from the big bad world. It is set apart for a task - called to be a prophetic voice. We are called to set aside the standards of the world, not to emulate them. We are called to higher values, to show the world that change is possible, that there is nothing inevitable about life if you don't want it to be.

I want to be part of a church that recognises its vocation to live a life worthy of the gospel. But I fear I am part of a church that has failed in that task. The world doesn't see righteousness, it sees self-righteousness. It sees an institution set above, not set apart. And the prophetic witness to values like justice, peace, love, can be marred by our collusion with prejudice, our exclusion of minorities, our in-fighting.

A holy church is one that knows its own incompleteness and is therefore open to continuing in pilgrimage. One driven by gospel values seeks to reform itself as well as the world around.

One, Holy ... CATHOLIC

The Church must be catholic. I mean catholic with a small 'c'.

It must be universal in every sense.

I want to be part of a church that acknowledges that it is part of a world-wide body of believers, not just a little enclave battling against everyone else. That is partly why I am such a convinced Methodist. I believe in Connexionalism - that the Church can only truly be the Church when it sees itself as part of something bigger. Our movement embraces much of the world. There are so many different ways of being Christian, and we must not allow ourselves to think that ours is the only, or even the best, way. A true connexionalism is an ecumenical one, rejoicing in the fact that there are Christians elsewhere just as devoted as us. Affirming our Catholicism is acknowledging our interdependence with other Methodists and other Christians.

I also want to be part of a church that is catholic in its accessibility. William Temple once remarked that the church is the only organisation that exists for people other than its members. Could that really be said of the modern church? Our hospitality is a sign of our catholicity. Methodists pride themselves in the Open Table policy at Communion, but does this truly reflect our openness and accessibility?

Andrei Rublev's Icon depicts the visit of God to Abram at Mamre (Gen 17). The three strangers share a common meal prepared by Abram and Sarai. Food is at the heart of our Biblical faith. Scripture talks about a banquet prepared for all peoples at the end of time. One of the most prevalent visions of heaven is of a wedding feast. Jesus is known to the disciples on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of bread.

I have this icon in my house to remind me of the duty and privilege of offering hospitality. It is no coincidence that the central act of Christian worship is a meal. Christ is most clearly seen in hospitality, a hospitality which must go beyond the Eucharistic table, and must extend to all, especially the weak and the marginalised.

A church that is catholic keeps a place at the table for everyone.

One, Holy, Catholic and ... APOSTOLIC

Apostolic - 'from the apostles'. The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the apostolic church. By this we mean that the faith held by the first apostles is the same faith to which we are loyal. This makes us bona fide Christians.

Do we really understand the enormity of that statement? We are part of the same church as the Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Paul and Peter, and Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ignatius Loyola. The Church stretches through time as well as across the world and the fullness of it arrives at our feet.

But the original term 'apostolic', was not about doctrine, it meant 'one who is sent'. The apostles were those who were sent out to preach and teach and heal. They were given a message and sent on a mission.

How come in the Church today so much of Christianity involves sitting? I want to be part of a church that is passionate about the gospel, so much so that they just have to let it out. Wesley talked about 'joy in believing' - do we need to relearn that?

And where is the movement? Too often we expect others to do the moving. If they want Christianity they must come to us in our building. And if we do any evangelism, we call out 'outreach', going out in order to bring others back!

I want to be part of a church known for its love, not its architecture. I want us to be known as people who are on the move. For the mission is not to take Christ, but to find the Christ who is already at work, waiting to change us through the encounter.

ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC - not a new vision. Will the church ever truly be what it is supposed to be? Do we have the energy or resources to fulfil it? It is easy to get disillusioned. But then we get to Holy Week, and relive the events around the last few days of Jesus' earthly life. How amazing and shaming and humbling: his commitment, his sacrifice, his patience in the face of suffering? And his glorious resurrection, bringing hope and new life.

So, our faith is renewed, the belief that each of us can change, and therefore the church and the world can change too. Not ideal fantasy, but a hope grounded in the events of Holy Week.

So once again we can say: 'I believe in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.' Amen.