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# One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic

Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 23, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I wonder if you have a motto. The United States has a motto: “In God we trust.” The difference between a motto and a mission statement is that a mission statement commits an organization to do something, whereas a motto expresses a reality you believe to be true whether you do anything about it or not. Andrew Carnegie had a motto: “First honesty, then industry, then concentration.” If you’re fancy, you design a posh coat of arms and put a motto in Latin underneath, like *Eruditio et Religio* or *Age. Fac ut gaudeam* (which, as I’m sure you know, means “Go on. Make my day”).

The church has a motto. It’s tucked neatly into the Nicene Creed. “We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church” – or *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica*, if you like your mottoes in Latin. You can see every dimension of this motto displayed in the Pentecost story in Acts chapter 2, the moment we often call the birthday of the church. This tight knit group of disciples surrounded by tongues of fire shows all four of these characteristics, sometimes known as the four marks of the church. We see the church as one, when it says, “They were all together in one place.” We see the church as holy, when it says, “A tongue [of fire] rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.” We see the church as catholic, in other words as embracing what today we often call diversity, when it says, “There were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem,” and when the large crowd says, “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” And it goes without saying that we see the church as apostolic, because this moment is the sending out of the apostles that all subsequent mission looks back to.

One, holy, catholic and apostolic. If only. It’s just as well this is a motto not a mission statement, because if it were a mission statement we’d all be fired. I’m sure like me you’ve had experience of church being few or even none of these things. You’ve known a church that seemed united, but around trivia, around pettiness, around prejudice, around anxiety, around things that seemed far from the holy, catholic and apostolic gospel. You’ve seen congregations working hard at being one, holy, and catholic but endlessly deferring to sub-committees and reviews and reports and bureaucracy and losing all the simplicity and urgency of the first apostles. You’ve seen people dedicated to holiness and to faithfulness to the early church but unable to be patient and understanding and remain one, or apparently incapable of embracing the diversity of the rainbow of God’s nations. You’ve seen a church that seemed to flourish and embody the unity, diversity and mission of the Acts of the Apostles but where holiness was let down by human fragility and failure.

And yet you’re here this morning. Funny that. You’ve seen the worst the church can be but still you’re here. I can only assume you must have a stubborn, pig-headed resilience for which the only appropriate word is love. My guess is you’re here this morning because you love the church. Sure, you know there’s a hundred things wrong with it, and you feel baffled and bewildered and bored and even betrayed by it, but yet you’re still held by its mystery.

Hold on to that word “mystery” for a moment. The Catholic philosopher Gabriel Marcel made a distinction between a problem and a mystery. A problem is something you can stand outside and walk around. It’s something you can usually solve by technical skill. A broken window is a problem, but you can solve it by fixing a new one. Often a problem can be solved using a technique developed by somebody else. But a mystery you can’t solve. A mystery you can’t stand outside. You have to enter it. A mystery is something you can’t just look at. It absorbs you into it. Someone else’s answer probably won’t work for you. You have to discover your own.

The church is a mystery and not a problem. Some may approach it as a problem and try to offer you a solution. There’s countless conferences every year offering techniques of church growth or training in family systems theory. But there isn’t a simple solution that solves it. And that’s because it’s a mystery. The church is the best idea anybody ever had. Dynamic unity, profound godliness, gregarious diversity, historic identity. You can’t beat that. It’s a fabulous combination. But it frequently becomes a monster, or a mess. It’s a real mystery.

One author who describes this mess is the British novelist Rose Macaulay. She spent a lot of her life on the edge of the church, partly because of its mysteries, and partly because of her own. Her semi-autobiographical novel *The Towers of Trebizond* describes a journey around the Middle East in the 1950s. In it she tells the story of a woman named Laurie, caught between the eccentricity of the characters she meets and her own irreconcilable loves. All the while Laurie is wrestling with the absurdity of the church. Her Middle Eastern travels bring Laurie to Bethlehem, and, while in that little town of poignant beginnings, she reflects on what's so terribly wrong and yet so completely right about the church, long ago and today. Bethlehem epitomizes the contrasts and mysteries of the church she knows so well. This is what she says.

[The church] grew so far, almost at once, from anything which can have been intended, and became so blood-stained and persecuting and cruel and war-like and made small and trivial things so important, and tried to exclude everything not done in a certain way and by certain people, and stamped out heresies with such cruelty and rage. And this failure of the Christian Church, of every branch of it in every country, is one of the saddest things that has happened in all the world. But it is what happens when a magnificent idea has to be worked out by human beings who do not understand much of it but interpret it in their own way and think they are guided by God, whom they have not yet grasped. And yet they had grasped something, so that the Church has always had great magnificence and much courage, and people have died for it in agony, which is supposed to balance all the other people who have had to die in agony because they did not accept it, and it has flowered up in learning and culture and beauty and art, to set against its ... incivility and obscurantism and barbarity and nonsense, and it has produced saints and martyrs and kindness and goodness, though these have also occurred freely outside it, and it is a wonderful and most extraordinary pageant of contradictions, and I, at least, want to be inside it, though it is foolishness to most of my friends. (195-7)

This is the mystery of the church as described by someone who knows it as well as she knows herself, and loves it the way you long for something or someone unique that lingers just out of reach. What Laurie is saying is that the church has been one, but it's also been divisive. It's been holy, but it's also been sinful. It's been catholic, but it's also been narrow. It's been apostolic, but it's also been forgetful. And yet amid what she calls its "wonderful and most extraordinary pageant of contradictions" she sees a place even for her, despite all her confusions and despair.

The biggest difference between a problem and a mystery is not just that a problem can be solved, while a mystery can't. It's that a problem is something you can walk away from, whereas a mystery becomes something that absorbs and engulfs you such a way that your life depends on it. That's what *The Towers of Trebizond* is fundamentally about. One night Laurie is troubled by a dream. In the dream she is wrestling with whether she will finally be drawn into the kingdom of God, or instead remain profoundly conflicted on the periphery. The fabled Black Sea port of Trebizond in northern Turkey becomes for her a vision of the new Jerusalem. She sees ethereal Trebizond, and she imagines herself on the doorstep of heaven. This is what she says.

Then, between sleeping and waking, there rose before me a vision of Trebizond: not Trebizond as I had seen it, but the Trebizond of the world's dreams, of my own dreams, shining towers and domes shimmering on a far horizon, yet close at hand, luminously enspelled in the most fantastic unreality, yet the only reality, a walled and gated city, magic and mystical, standing beyond my reach yet I had to be inside, an alien wanderer yet at home, held in the magical enchantment; and at its heart, at the secret heart of the city and the legend and the glory in which I was caught and held, there was some pattern that I could not unravel, some hard core that I could not make my own, and, seeing the pattern and the hard core enshrined within the walls, I turned back from the city and stood outside it, expelled in mortal grief. (200-01)

By talking about the "pattern" that she can't "unravel" and the "hard core" that she can't make her own, Laurie seems to be echoing Gabriel Marcel's distinction between a problem and a mystery. If the church is a problem, Laurie is never going to solve it, but remain gloomily outside it looking for the solution. Yet the church isn't a problem. The church is a mystery, and, as she says, it is "magic and mystical, standing beyond my reach yet I had to be inside, an alien wanderer yet at home, held in the magical enchantment."

Is this you? Are you Laurie? Do you relate to those words, "An alien wanderer yet at home, held in the magical enchantment"? My experience as a pastor has taught me that most churchgoing Christians are more like Laurie

than we generally care to admit. Our view of the church is stretched between our thrill at the “magnificent idea,” and our horror at the “incivility and obscurantism and barbarity and nonsense.” And our view of ourselves is similarly stretched between our longing for certain answers and clear solutions to problems, and our recognition that, like Laurie, we are complex and compromised people knee-deep in complicity with fallible commitments and flawed convictions.

So how do we regard the church, without lapsing into bitter cynicism or escaping into lofty idealism? How do we eagerly seek the church’s renewal, even while we know we can’t *fix* it? Well, I suggest we translate the church’s motto, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, into four questions. When faced with a new development, a change in leadership, a moral quandary, a pressing crisis, these are the four questions to ask – four questions to make us one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

First, the unity question: Is our church making us one with one another?

Second, the holiness question: Is our church making us one with God?

Third, the catholicity question: Is our church as gloriously diverse as God’s world?

And fourth, the apostolicity question: Would the first apostles recognize us?

Almost every church is strong on one of these questions. One of the reasons the church is so divided is because various different parts of the church differ on which of these questions is the most important one. We all have our favorite and we’re all liable to focus on one to the exclusion of the others. But the truth is, they’re all *equally* important. The difficult part is not saying yes to one of them, it’s saying yes to all of them at the same time.

How can you tell the Holy Spirit is at work in the church? This is how. When the people are drawing closer to one another, when they are being drawn closer to God, when the church is becoming as gloriously diverse as God’s world, and when it is looking more and more like the early church, so the first apostles could immediately recognize it. That’s what the Holy Spirit did at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit embraced the full diversity of humanity and made people one with one another and one with God. That’s what the Holy Spirit does today. That’s what the Holy Spirit alone does. That’s what we’re praying for when we call on the Holy Spirit.

One, holy, catholic, apostolic. Never be persuaded that you have to choose one out of the four. Always seek all four together. One, holy, catholic, apostolic. It’s a magnificent idea, and it’s a pageant of contradictions. And, in the power of the Holy Spirit, it’s a mystery that, once you enter it, will absorb your whole life.