

SERMON: “Words of Hope: *I Believe in the Communion of saints.*”

Rev. Geoff Ross. Sunday, April 9, 2017. St. Andrew’s, Brampton.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day Jesus rode the donkey down the side of the Kidron Valley toward Jerusalem and the excited crowd running beside the road waving their palm branches loudly proclaiming that the Messiah has come in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophesy that the Messiah would ride victoriously into the City. (Zech 9:9-10) In eleven verses our Palm Sunday reading moves quickly from Bethpage and Bethany, to the acquiring of the donkey, to the ride into Jerusalem with the palm waving disciples and crowd, many of who, despite the events of the week to come, would belong/become the ‘saints’ of His Church.

For Lent we’ve been exploring the Apostles’ Creed and I have stressed the fact that the Creed **IS** what we believe – that it is **THE** defining, defiant, and defending document of our faith. While not Biblical in the strictest sense, it is wholly founded on scripture and the teachings of Jesus/God as found in scripture. But, now, we can also see the Creed as being a statement that deals with the whole of the arc of salvation. The first Statement affirms God as a God of grace – grace known in/through “*Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord*”, that the second Statement makes clear came to be-with us to die for us so He might stand with us at our time of judgement. The third Statement focuses on the ongoing role of the Holy Spirit and shifts to the continuation of God’s plan revealed in/through the Body of Christ – the Church – and those witnesses, the communion of saints, who made/make it up.

Last week when we professed that we “*believe in the holy catholic/universal Church*” we were saying that we acknowledge that the Church – while seemingly divided – is united, and that as sisters and brothers in Christ we are the extended family of God; that “we” are the Body of Christ. By confessing our faith in the “*communion of saints*”, we are repeating ourselves; first we’re confessing our faith in the Church as God sees it – one body, now we’re confessing our in the Church ‘horizontal’, the Church on the ground, lived out in all its messy glory.

As I mentioned in the insert, just as the word ‘*catholic*’ used to describe the universal and united nature of the worldwide Church, the phrase “*the communion of saints*” is another part of the Apostles’ Creed that troubles some Protestants. It shouldn’t; as Rebekah said last week, we don’t use/hear/understand words today like those who wrote the Creed did. First, when the Creed was being written “*communion*” meant “*Fellowship/Gathering/Mutual participation*” and “*saints*” meant “*holy ones/people set apart*” – so rather than thinking of Communion in heaven a closer (literally) understanding would be “*the gathering and mutual participation of people who know they have been set apart by God.*” This statement is about the Church, but it is about more than just this/our gathering. When we stand and proclaim we believe in the “*communion of saints*” we’re saying we believe in the “*great cloud of witnesses*” as

Paul writes in our reading, which surrounds and urges us on; that connects us/here today in a fellowship with Christians both past and future. But what is a ‘saint’?

Paul used the word ‘saint’ – a word he used to describe “*anyone who is in Christ, [who is now] a new creation*” (2Cor 5:17) – over 40 times to address new Christians, those whom God has chosen/recreated/shaped and who have trusted their lives to Jesus in each of his letters. The word/title ‘saint’ was common and significant in the early Church; it signified the special/unique/life-changing quality of their new life in Christ – a life made possible through their having the “*same mind*”/“*communion*” with Christ and one another. (Phil 2:2,5) And this is good news for us because this is how Paul would describe us! A quick look at Paul’s list of saints and while we see a few ‘big’ names, we find the ‘less-than-respectable’ Rahab who gets named along with the countless “good people” who were “mistreated, tortured”, “stoned to death” for their witness and faith. ‘Saints’ are ‘sinners’ made clean in/through God’s grace. The ‘bar’ is about this high – its set low – all it takes is faith to become part of this club!

[My saints/20 yrs/still excited] When asked about the Presbyterian Church unique I often reflect on the fact that we are a connectional Church; each congregation is connected/united to each other; but we are also connected to one another – the Church today/tomorrow. This is what we confess, when we confess our belief in the “communion of saints”: that through the Holy Spirit we’re connected, you and me, with each other, and with those who came before us, back through those 170 years ago formed this congregation; connected by an unbroken line of faith, of confession, of belief to everyone who worshipped God/followed Jesus through history, back through generations/centuries to the Apostles themselves. But it does more than that; the line winds its way from you/me, from saint to saint, to Jesus. Amen.