We believe in [belong to] the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church”. Yeah right!

Kevin Ward. Candour May 2012

The church of the fourth century at Nicaea (AD. 325) and Constantinople (AD. 381) affirmed as the four crucial marks of the church, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, a creed we still retain and recite as summarising the core essentials of our faith. It is doubtful if the church of the twenty first century could come up with these same marks the essential identifying markers of its form or life. So what do they mean and what might they mean for how we live out our faith corporately, if we were to seriously wrestle with them and not just express them as beliefs but let them shape the way we belong?

Some might ask why should we? That was then this is now! However we should take seriously the point made by Tom Torrance that “they do not denote independent qualities inhering in the church, but are affirmations of the nature of the church as it participates in Jesus Christ…. They are first of all attributes of Christ himself, but attributes in which the church shares through its union and communion with him. Therefore in the unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the church it is the image and face of Christ himself that comes to view.” In other words, these marks are not peripheral to the church they are core to its identity as the body of Christ, and if they are not present then it is difficult for the church to be the sign, witness and foretaste of what God in Christ is doing in the world through the Spirit, which is its calling.

One...

Almost everyone affirms the unity or the oneness of the church, but ever since the Schism of 1054 that oneness has been somewhat difficult to locate, and since the splintering of the Reformation even more so. Daniel Migliore helpfully defines it as “a distinctive unity rooted in communion with God through Christ in the Spirit. The unity of the church is a fragmentary and provisional participation in the costly love of the triune God.” Recent trinitarian theology with its focus on a plurality within an essential oneness is helpful for us in understanding how the Christian gospel embraces both diversity and unity. Much of the New Testament is written dealing with this issue. The unity of the church does not lie in either a controlling doctrinal conformity or a formal institutional structure, and I would resist any endeavours to impose either of those kinds of unity on the church. Within the diversity of our expressions unity lies within the life we participate in together with the triune God. As Hans Kung expresses it, “It is one and the same God who gathers the scattered from all places and all ages and makes them into one people of God.”

However ever since the Reformers placed the focus on seeing the unity of the church in the invisible church rather than the visible church, that understanding has been used as a way of enabling churches and their leaders to do little about working to see unity as a visible mark of the church in its present reality. We are happy to affirm we believe in it provided we don’t really have to belong. We have continued to be happily schismatic, tearing apart the fabric of church whenever we find something on which we differ. This “creeping congregationalism”, which afflicts all varieties of church life in contemporary societies, at both a denominational and interdenominational level, heightens the tendency to focus on the local and the particular, as if that is all there was to being church. Jesus left behind a visible community not an invisible concept. A community he called to be one, and so it is incumbent on we who are the church to continually work hard to find ways to express in our increasingly diverse culture that this oneness is a reality, not merely some ethereal and mystical entity we believe in.

... Holy ...

The word holy and the concept of holiness is hardly popular in our contemporary context, either inside or outside the church. It raises images of a “holier than thou” judgmentalism and an isolationist separatism fearful of contamination by an evil world. A preoccupation with holiness it is suggested
has been a major hindrance to the mission of the church in the world. Identification and engagement with the world is what the creator God is about. The word holy is of course the primary word used to name the essence of the nature of God. It is, if you like, what marks out God as God, as distinctly different from everything else in creation. It is something that belongs essentially to God. For other things or persons to be described as holy therefore is to claim that they also are marked by the essence of the character of God, and in this way are to some extent different from the rest of creation.

But how do we know what God is like if we are to share in that character? The central claim of the New Testament and of Christian thought is that the fullest revelation of God is to be found in the human person Jesus Christ. By looking at the life of Jesus we see what it is like to live a human life marked by the character, or holiness, of God. But more than that the New Testament claims that by his death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit Christ mediates to us the very life of God so we can share in the fellowship of the trinity. Here is the essence of the holiness of the church. It can be identified by the degree to which it lives a life reflecting the glory of God seen in Christ and this is made possible by the presence of the Spirit in its midst. When we do this we will demonstrate a distinctive quality to our life that will indeed mark us out as different, distinct from others. While this quality of holiness will be demonstrated in the church in an imperfect way, as Calvin put it, it is the “measure toward which it is daily advancing”.

Of course one of the challenges in this is how do we define holiness. Even if we agree that it is defined by how Jesus lived humanly, whereas once upon a time there may have been some consensus of understanding on what this meant, now the church is widely and deeply divided about it and the issues that raises are often the cause of further division and schism. Just take issues such as abortion, same sex relationships, the place of women, war, and social or economic justice to name a few. These can tear churches apart at a local level, cause denominations to split, and ensure that some denominations will have nothing to do with some other denominations, which they regard as unholy alliances, perhaps so unholy they are not true churches at all. This is a challenging question for us all if we are honest? How plural can our understanding of holiness be so we can embrace people who live markedly different lifestyles as part of the one church with us? Of course this raises significant questions as to how much of our understanding of this is in fact merely part of the culture in which we have been raised or live rather than the gospel itself. This in turn feeds back into our denominations, the particularities of which are often a reflection of the cultural context in which they were historically formed. Holiness challenges us not only in how we are to be different or distinct from the world in which we live, but also how do we work together as one with others who understand that distinctiveness differently?

... Catholic ...

The affirmation of the catholicity of the church refers to its universality and inclusivity. It is the church that has existed everywhere, always, and for all. It guards the church against parochialism, sectarianism, racism, and chronological conceit. It is clear that both the unity and the catholicity of the church go together, they are two interwoven dimensions of the one church. However as with oneness we need to guard against it being understood merely as an abstract kind of universalism hovering over the particularities of culture and history. Again it is a mark that needs to be demonstrated in the life of the visible church as it is lived out in local communities. Avery Dulles claims that catholicity “is not the accomplished fact of having many members or a wide geographical distribution, but rather the dynamic catholicity of a love reaching out to all and excluding no one.”

One of the major trends of the post 1960s world of the global village, has been a growing pluralism of our societies. Not just through the coming to societies such as NZ of markedly different cultural groups from overseas, but also by the breakup of the dominant white European culture into a multiplicity of subcultures. Not only is this across generations, but also within generations themselves. This pluralisation has been heightened by the fact that increasingly people do not live their life in one geographical place where they might mix with people of a wide variety of ages and cultures, but rather are mobile and live their life with communities of choice, usually consisting of
people of the same culture as themselves. Often these subgroups are quite exclusive, having their own distinctive language, symbols, and lifestyles. At a time in the past when people in a community lived their lives in that particular community, when generations shared many of the activities of life together, the local church embraced within its community members from every walk and stage of life within that community. It was catholic and inclusive in that sense. This fed through into the nature of our denominations. How do we reach people today within all these different cultural subgroups, when the culture of church as it is, represents that culture of a bygone age?

The answer of many today is that we need separate churches to incarnate the gospel into all those cultural subgroups. And so we have childrens, youth church, student church, young adults church, family church, Korean church, Samoan church, breakfast church…… and so on and so on. These churches become quite age, ethnic or culture specific. However is this not to ignore the strong theological thrust of much of the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul, such as in Ephesians 2 where talking about the major cultural divide of his world, that between Jew and Gentile, he writes that “Christ … Has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall … to create in himself one new humanity” and in Galatians 3 that “in Christ there is “no longer Jew or Greek… slave or free… male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” It is only as we live this out as we relate as part of the one catholic church of Jesus Christ that this fractured divided tribalised world people may see what God is doing in the world in Christ, forming one whole new humanity in which the estranged groups are reconciled, that in Christ cultural separation might be transcended and that the new community of God’s people is inclusive of people of every race and every tribe and every tongue, even here now on earth.

4. Apostolic…

A number of those in the missional church movement define the apostolicity of the church as its essential missional nature. That before it is anything else it is missional. While it is true the word apostle does have in it the idea of one who is sent, and while I agree fully with the sentiment being expressed, I do not believe that particular interpretation of apostolic as a mark of church is how it was understood by those who created the Nicene Creed or historically within the church. In confessing the apostolicity of the church we are acknowledging that the true church is founded on the apostles. The faith and life of the church must stand in continuity with their enduring witness. This continuity is ensured not by some physical continuity through the sacramental laying on of hands, but by our faithfulness to and reaffirmation of the gospel they gave witness to in the writings of the New Testament. As Jurgen Moltmann puts it: “The apostolic succession is in fact and in truth the evangelical succession, the continuing and unadulterated proclamation of the gospel of the risen Christ.”

It is of course one thing to affirm that “our supreme rule of faith is the Word of God” as the Presbyterian Church does or that “the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice”, as a Baptist church might. It is quite another to interpret what those words actually mean for us today. One of the things contemporary hermeneutics has made us aware of is there is no such thing as an uninterpreted word or act. Being faithful to the apostolic witness is not just mere repetition of those words, or repeating the way in which they might have been interpreted as being appropriate to another place and another time but that the apostolic word must be interpreted anew for every generation and every context. A failure to recognise this, and realise therefore that “now we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13.12) so relating to others with a due humility, has led to us all too readily regarding others as dangerous and deceived at best, heretics at worst. For some parts of the church in particular, regarding other churches, or better parts of the church, as failing to take the Bible as their authority, has been the major cause for their failure to embrace them and work with them as part of the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church” to which we all belong.

So what am I arguing for here? Not for a structural move toward one organisational church as the church union movement of the 1960 and 70s hoped. The church from its inception, even in the early years of the New Testament, had a healthy plurality and balance of local freedoms but committed
unity, in “belief, behaviour and belonging” (to use a contemporary trinity). Paul’s writings to the churches in Rome and Corinth make this clear. This is evident in the history of the early church as well. What it does mean though is a recognition of and commitment to the fact that we are first both individually and corporately members of the one, holy, apostolic and catholic church. As a Christian I am a “catholic Christian first”. My identity as part of the Reformed tradition and specifically the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and to the local expression of that (in my case the Highgate Parish) within that comes as a secondary identity, and needs to be kept that way. The way I act toward others needs to reflect that. They are not my or our competitors, let alone enemies, but our sisters and brothers in Christ, and in a market driven consumer world which always urges us to put us at the centre, to ensure our market identity and share, we need to not just hold this an attitude or belief but do tangible actions to express it as a reality in how we belong. This is the reason that Paul was so insistent in his writings that the wealthier Gentile churches gave to his collection to take to the poorer Jewish churches and why he insisted that table fellowship be open to all, regardless of what culture issues around food and drink my endeavour to keep them apart.

If what God is doing is to reconcile all things together in Christ (Eph 1.10) then how will our world know that if they do not look and see a church which acts out its identity as ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’?