

SUNDAY, March 17, 2024 Lent 5 “Christ Before Me”

Psalm 27, Hebrews 12:1-2, 14-15. John 11:17-27 Statements of Faith A New Creed and The Apostle’s Creed

An Irish joke to start today: “What is Irish and sits outside all day and night? Patty O’Furniture” Yes, it is St Patrick’s Day today—a day lifting up the ministry of St. Patrick who is credited with introducing Christianity to Ireland. It is celebrated on the anniversary of his death having lived (c. 385 – c. 461). St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and by extension this special day celebrates the heritage and culture of the Irish in general. One of the largest parades is in New York City and along with wearing green attire and shamrocks many people share green drinks and traditional Irish food. Many people associate this day as a time to eat and drink alcohol. This stems from the fact that this day to celebrate St. Patrick occurs during Lent and for this day alone, Lenten restrictions on eating and drinking alcohol were lifted. This is probably why the tradition of alcohol consumption is associated with it. But who is St. Patrick?

He was a priest, later Bishop and teacher and as such a teacher of the Christian faith where he believed in the Trinity of God and in the presence of Christ Jesus lived and served faithfully. The Old Irish Prayer from the Breastplate of St. Patrick is one of the oldest statements of faith and defines the relationship between Christ Jesus and individuals. We sang a portion of this statement of faith as our first hymn “Christ Before Me” but it is often known as “I Bind Myself to Thee”. And this statement of faith leads us to seek a new understanding of what it means to have faith, and to articulate or tell others about it. This is the focus today as we conclude this series on Prayers of the Heart as next Sunday is Palm Sunday which marks the beginning of Holy Week. “

When we think of Statements of Faith we might remember specific words or phrases that call us to know who Jesus is. We read in Psalm 27 that “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” IT is by faith that we may answer as in vs. 13-14—a clear statement: *‘I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.’* But do we really believe this?

What Jesus asks us to believe is simply stated in John 1. IN this passage, Jesus is with Martha one of the sisters of Lazarus who has just died. He tells her that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. But it is through Jesus words that we hear the meaning of resurrection and life. Jesus says, ‘I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me even though they die, will live and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Jesus then asks- do you believe?

This is Martha's response; "*Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming to the world*". Martha had no hesitation in telling Jesus that she believed him to be the Messiah.

But what do you believe? This question of faith has long triggered people to reflect, pray and try to discern what we are called to believe as Christians. Hebrews 12 states that "Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." He is the one through whom we believe died on the cross for our sakes. "IT is for the sake of the joy that we might experience in his love," that we receive the gift of God's grace.

Statements of faith date back to just over 100 years after Christ ascended into heaven. Through gatherings or Councils of early church leaders, creeds were debated and recorded and revised in time. The Nicene Creed was one of the first to be developed but it is The Apostles' Creed first written @500 AD has been memorized, expressed and shared worldwide. Yet there are other statements of faith. The United Church of Canada came into existence in 1925 and brought traditions of various church interests. The Basis of Union outlines the key faith beliefs of the founding churches. As the world was facing heartache and losses with World War II the United Church Statement of 1940 made a clear path for what this emerging church in Canada was about and the focus of the faith in action.

Yet there have been others—in 1968 'A New Creed' was put forward. "Man is not alone" was the first line—of course this was updated with inclusive language in 1984 to read "we are not alone'. Versions of A new Creed exist set to music but it is the lines affirming that God is with us which ring out for now generations of United Church people "IN life, in death, in life beyond death; God is with us, we are not alone. Thanks be to God."

Another statement of faith was developed in 2006 as a verbal picture of what the United Church understands its faith to be in our early 21st-century context. It is poetic in form and describes the relationship God has with people and what people might have with God.

But what is the purpose of these statements of faith? To remember, to recite, to combine what is in our minds with what our hearts believe. They are a means of expressing one's faith without hindering what one does. A statement of faith delves deeper into your mission and purpose by determining what you believe in as a individual and ultimately as a church community. Your church's faith statement also makes it easier for guests to know your beliefs and whether they will feel at home with your congregation.

St Patrick's statement of faith: The first five sections of the prayer or hymn begin "I bind unto myself today" followed by a list of sources of strength that the prayer calls on for support. The text is conventionally divided into eleven sections which invoke God as Trinity- and to have Christ ever present and knowing that salvation is of the Lord. It is a statement of faith, of hope and of guidance for one who seeks to follow Jesus in all ways every day.

As a prayer of the heart, a statement of faith may guide your life but it is as stated for the UCC these "statements are recognized as doctrine, subordinate to the primacy of scripture." This means that scripture tells us the story of Jesus and should be held in our hearts as the Logos of God. The statements of faith describe this relationship between God –as Trinity and the people who have come to faith and love one another through God.

The question is what do you believe? What are the prayers of your heart based upon? Where might you seek God? Christ? The Spirit? As St Patrick wrote, Christ is all around us—but to receive God's grace, you must invite Him in, believe, have faith and live.

As we approach Holy Week, we will hear the story of Christ's passion and love for us all. IT is not always to hear of his death, but without its we have nothing. We are an Easter people filled with hope and right now, this is what our world needs. Hope in Christ which we believes come through Jesus' death and resurrection. Thanks be to God.

PRAYER

We pray that you will hear our prayers of the heart. Words from your Word the Bible inspire us and statements of faith of those who went before us call us to remember and to love Christ Jesus your son. As we share in this time of Silence.. we ask that you would hear our prayer.
Amen

