

Ch Ch Cathedral Trinity X 5 Aug 2018

Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.  
(Eph.4.15)

I am fairly sure that many of you here this morning come not just from different parts of the world – different parts of Ireland, different parts of Europe, different continents – but also from different kinds of education, different Christian traditions, possibly even different religions. But you have just heard in the epistle a remarkable and passionate plea from the early decades of the Christian church that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of us all, and that the church is composed of people with widely differing gifts - prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors – in our day we might add administrators, architects, accountants, artists, writers and so on – whose job is to build up the people of God into the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, so that we should no longer be like children carried away by every wind of doctrine, but that we should grow up into Christ, to be the body of Christ.

That is a powerful passage, and its obvious concern is that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and that Christians with their wide-ranging qualities and abilities should all grow up into the one body of Christ and not get misled or blown away like children by what the

writer calls ‘every wind of doctrine’ proposed by crafty souls, doubtless for their own interests. A friend of mine is very ready to name politicians and policies by way of example, but you may each think your own thoughts on that. The concern of our epistle is rather that, by *speaking the truth in love* – what a wonderful phrase – we are to grow up into Christ.

We have all heard our church leaders in recent decades and annual Weeks of Prayer for Christian Unity proclaiming the need for unity between different Christian traditions, and we have all seen how all traditions have preached this without wanting to give up the truths that their own tradition stands for – understandably, because those truths have often been maintained at the cost of blood. While truth has been spoken, it has not always been in love. But I want to point this morning to another phrase in that epistle – to that little phrase ‘the unity of faith and knowledge’.

We often use the word ‘faith’, without thinking about it very much, to mean at least two different things. We can use it to mean ‘the faith’, the Christian faith, the whole complex of belief identified as Christianity by the world. So the Epistle to the Ephesians speaks of ‘one faith’. Or we can use it as a near synonym for ‘belief’ – ‘this is our faith’, we say, meaning, ‘this is what we believe.’ Or we can use it with St Paul’s in his letter to the Corinthians to speak of the virtue of faith; ‘so faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.’ In this sense it means our response to divine truth. And in our epistle, when we read of ‘the unity of faith and knowledge’, that is what is meant.

Our faith in Jesus starts with knowledge. It starts with what we know about Jesus from the writings left by his early followers – Paul first of all, then the gospel writers, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. What they tell us is little enough, especially when we put aside the legends that developed surrounding Jesus. Jesus went round Galilee preaching, healing, upsetting conventional Jews by his more open ways, upsetting both Jewish and Roman authorities who misinterpreted him politically and had him put to death – but his presence among his followers survived the grave, and they saw his death as in some way bringing them salvation. And their interpretation of his preaching and death and resurrection had a rapid effect upon their world, soon reached Rome, and has produced the church as we know it. And within three centuries the Church produced that expression of belief which we call the Nicene Creed and which sums up the church's general knowledge of Jesus and which we will soon be proclaiming as *our* belief, the belief of Christendom.

Now that Creed contains statements of many different kinds. To say that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate is a statement of factual history. To say that Jesus was crucified *for us* under Pontius Pilate is to make an important claim about Jesus. To say that *his* kingdom shall have no end is to make a much wider theological claim. The literature interpreting the many clauses of the Creed is enormous. Theologians have debated every word of this statement of our beliefs for the last 17 centuries, and will continue to do so. The Creed is about human knowledge of Jesus and

belief in Jesus, spelled out in language from the fourth-century thought world, and its meaning is endlessly debatable.

But *faith* in Jesus – and in God - is another matter entirely. Our beliefs can vary between us - I am sure that among us here this morning are represented many variants of belief. We may all understand these statements about Jesus differently; the differences will result from our differences in education, in culture, in historical knowledge, and so on. We may hold some beliefs more or less strongly. And in debating them, we must always aim to speak the truth in love. But *faith* takes things onto a different plane. But whatever the sum of our knowledge and belief about God and Jesus, our *faith* in them will be hard to deny. Faith is our *attitude* to what little we know or believe; faith is our *response* to the being of God, to the calling of Christ. But now we see, as Paul said, through a glass darkly. We don't always understand our faith. Faith seeking *understanding* is an important part of the Christian tradition. We live that way.

So each Sunday we come to church – whether to a service of readings and preaching, a communion service, or some other occasion – because buried there inside us is some sense of faith in the God of the Jewish-Christian heritage, and in the person of Jesus whom we have come to know through Christian tradition, and in the Spirit which is a way of talking about the creative activity of God in the world – and while we try to live in love, and always live in hope, we know that we cannot live without faith. Faith wins over knowledge and belief every time.