

Help us to live the Life Everlasting
in the abundance promised by Christ our Lord
while we wait for his coming in glory.

Amen.

Daily Devotions from the URC

The Apostles' Creed

22nd July – 9th August 2018



Introduction

The United Reformed Church upholds, amongst others, the Apostle's Creed. We tend only to use it during baptismal services which is a shame. Other traditions recite it more often as part of Sunday worship.

The Creed is a basic statement of Christian belief. It is first mentioned in the year 390 and note is then made of it being old and venerable. It was once believed to have been composed by the Apostles themselves but that belief is unlikely. Instead, it seems to have come from the Early Church as a simple statement of Christian belief. We will spend the next few days looking at each clause, the Scriptures behind it and reflect on it as a help for everyday discipleship.

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What do you imagine when you think about ‘everlasting’? A huge sky filled with innumerable stars? An endless ocean stretching to the horizon and beyond?

These images of vastness can help us to ponder God’s awesome nature, but that’s not really what the Apostles’ Creed means when it talks about the Life Everlasting. Jesus called it abundant life, or “life in all its fullness”, or “life, and far more life than before”. If you’re a Star Trek fan, “It’s life, Jim, but not as we know it”.

When the New Testament mentions eternal life, the root word is αἰών (aion), which gives us our word eon. In geology, eons denote the different types of life on earth. Algae belong to one eon, humans to another. Our life is not just algae-life that carries on for a long time, it’s a totally different sort of life.

And so it is with the Life Everlasting. It’s not merely the same old life lived for ever and ever, but a different type of living, an Everlasting type of living. Living with a capital L. That’s what Jesus was getting at when he spoke of abundant life, in all its fullness, life eternal - now.

It’s not only about after we die. The Nicene Creed puts it as “the life of the world to come”. Not life *in* the world to come (although that’s true), but life *of* the world to come. Right here. Right now. Heaven on earth in a very real sense.

Eternal life is not about *duration*, but *quality*. We say, “I believe in the Life Everlasting”, how will you live it today?

Prayer

God of all creation,
You have set eternity in our hearts
that we might have a foretaste
of the life of the world to come.

It cannot be repaired or reformed. It needs to die, and God's world needs to be born in its place. Paul calls it the New Creation, and it happens in Jesus. It's the Easter process: the old dies in Christ, and the new world is born out of his resurrection.

Resurrection of the body is a promise for us: we will be there to share it! It gives us what we need to commit ourselves to Jesus' mission of changing the world, whatever the opposition and cost. It is the faith we need to take up our cross and follow him.

Prayer

Deliver us from the need to survive, Resurrection God,
so that we may begin to live Jesus-shaped lives that count for your
Kingdom!
Amen.

Thursday 9th August ...and the life everlasting. Amen

*Fay Rowland is a graduate student at Wesley House, Cambridge
Theological Federation.*

St John 10: 7 - 10

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Reflection

The Life Everlasting – that's a big concept!

Sunday 22nd July Psalm 56

*The Rev'd Fredwyn Hosier Thames North Synod Pastoral Consultant,
Palmers Green*

1 O my God, show mercy to me;
men would take my life away.
Hostile forces press upon me;
they pursue me all the day.

2 Slanderers are close behind me;
they pursue me all day long.
In their arrogance they hound me;
they are numerous and strong.

3 When I am afraid, I'll trust you.
4 I will praise your faithful word;
I will trust and not be fearful.
What can man do to me, Lord?

5 All day long they plot to harm me,
twisting everything I say.
6 They conspire, they lurk, they trail me,
keen to take my life away.

7 Let them not escape your anger;
bring the nations down, O Lord.
8 In your book write my entreaties;
in your scroll my tears record.

9 When I call on you to help me,
then my foes will turn aside;
This is how I will be certain
that my God is on my side.

10 In the LORD, whose word I honour,

in my God—I praise his word—
11 I will trust and not be fearful.
What can man do to me, Lord?

12 I have taken vows before you;
to my God I will be true.
Sacrifices of thanksgiving
I will gladly give to you.

13 For you kept my feet from stumbling,
and from death you set me free,
So that I may walk before you
and the light of life may see.

Reflection

This is a Psalm written centuries ago. Many people today could echo its sentiments. Voices from our time could easily ask God for help because they are being bullied or persecuted. “I am being tormented every day. There is no let up and they are constantly waiting to attack me.” Every day we hear of people being bullied. In the workplace, in the Church, in school, in the home. It is hard to know where to turn for help. People’s lives are ruined, and even lost, when they are the victim of relentless bullying. The Psalmist asks God to punish the bullies, and thanks God for saving him. As People of Faith we can do the same, but it seems that bullies often go unpunished and it is hard to believe that anyone can make a real difference. Maybe it is us, who are witnesses to the persecution, who need to stand up and help anyone who needs to see “the light of life” in the darkness that surrounds them. Maybe it is us who should actually see the tears that are being shed, and not be afraid to stand beside the one who is crying. All over the world there are those speaking out against bullying of all kinds, but there are still too many people who do not have a voice and who live in never ending despair. Can we, though the grace of God, be that voice for them?

Reflection

©W Hamond, UFS, with apologies to Eric Clapton (“Tears in Heaven”)

Most of us actually believe in the immortality of the soul: when we die, our souls – the “real us” – live on in heaven with God. That’s not resurrection. It’s giving up on the world: God can’t save the world, so opts instead to rescue the (relatively few) people who are somehow salvageable.

It’s not Biblical and it’s not Jesus. The Big Story in the Bible is God saving all that has been made. It begins with creation (Genesis) and ends with God “pitching tent” on a resurrected earth (Revelation 21: 1-5a). This is the answer to Jesus’ prayer: “Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth”.

Getting from the world we humans have made to the place of Life and flourishing that God always intended is a risky, costly business for God! The Bible calls it “salvation”. It’s Christmas and Easter: God taking human flesh in Jesus, and suffering and dying on a cross on our behalf.



“Sin” is the Biblical world for all that is wrong with the world. It means “a world made in opposition to God”; all the “sins” we see and commit are symptoms of this underlying disease. Its deadliest effect is to unleash powers that trap humanity in unbreakable chains, so that despair and death always manage to have the Last Word.

so that we, too, may take up our cross,
bear within ourselves the cost of sin,
and allow new relationships and a new world to be born -
by forgiving others, even as we ask them and you to forgive us.
Amen.

[Wednesday 8th August ...the resurrection of the body,...](#)

*Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road
URC*

1 Corinthians 15: 51-54

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'

Please let it be so. Amen

[Monday 23rd July St Bridget of Sweden](#)

*The Rev'd Andy Braunston, Minister of Barrhead, Shawlands and
Stewarton URCs in the Synod of Scotland's Southside Cluster*

Information

Bridget's father was governor of Uppland when she was born in about the year 1303. She married at the age of fourteen, had eight children and often attended the royal court, where she continued to experience the mystical revelations she had known since childhood. These increased in intensity after her husband's death and, three years later, she responded by founding a monastery for nuns and monks at Vadstena in 1346. Bridget's daughter Catherine was the first abbess of the so-called Brigettine Order, which became very influential in northern Europe. After travelling to Rome to obtain the pope's approval for her plans, Bridget never returned to Sweden but spent the rest of her life as a pilgrim, an adviser to rulers and church leaders, and a minister to all in need. Her Revelations were recorded by her confessors before her death, which occurred on this day in 1373.

Isaiah 61.10 – 62.5

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

Reflection

I have always been fascinated by the lives of the saints - not by sickly sweet hagiography but by the facts that slip through.

There seem to be two parts to Bridget's life - marriage, whilst still - to our eyes - a child, her child rearing years and then bereavement. Freed from her life as a wife she was then free to found a monastic order and follow God's call on her life. Her religious visions seem to have been constants in both parts of her life. The life of women in the 14th Century didn't involve political power - yet for Bridget her visions confirmed her sanctity and so popes, bishops and kings listened to her - she became a highly influential woman in a very male dominated world. Like the writer in this part of Isaiah she couldn't be silent but needed to proclaim her faith.

We live in a very different world to Bridget. We don't need to separate out a calling to family life with a call to follow God into active ministry; women don't need to rely on religious visions in order to have influence; religious experience is no longer seen as the norm. Yet, like Bridget, we are called to let our faith, which cannot be silent, to influence the world around us. We may live more

rise out of the ashes when relationships have been broken beyond repair; when there is no means of undoing what has been done.

"I believe in the forgiveness of sins" is a commitment to practice forgiveness. Forgiveness is the lifeblood of the Church. Churches ought to be communities of forgiveness – places where renewed and restored relationships are a daily reality and experience.

We don't do that very well. It's hardly surprising: forgiveness is hugely costly. It means choosing to bear the pain and cost of what other people do to us. It means offering them a free pass. It means allowing love to triumph over hurt and anger. It means being Christ to the very people who least deserve it.

So, when someone says, "I'm sorry", our usual response is to say, "Oh, that's okay – it doesn't matter". Of course it matters! Forgiveness isn't for the "little things" – the "forgivable things". It's for the big things that crucify and kill relationships.

It isn't accidental that Jesus speaks about forgiveness after giving his disciples the Holy Spirit: forgiveness is the overflow of God-life. It isn't something we can do in our own strength. Jesus isn't giving them the power to hold people in a state of unforgiveness: he is reminding them that forgiveness is always mutual and conditional. "Forgive our sins in the same way that we forgive one another", he taught us to pray.

What would happen if we made confession a time of forgiving others, as well as confessing our own sins ...?

Prayer

Make us Christ-like, O God,
not merely people who name the name of Jesus.
Give us your Holy Spirit

Help us to remember that,
as you call us to be your disciples,
we belong to one another.

Remind us the work of peace building
starts with us.

May your Body be healed and transformed,
that we are ready to bring about
your Kingdom in our world. Amen

Tuesday 7th August ...the forgiveness of sins,...

*Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road
URC*

St John 20: 22-23

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are
forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Reflection

Broken hands on broken ploughs,
Broken treaties, broken vows,
Broken bodies, broken bones,
Broken voices on broken phones
Broken words never meant to be spoken,
Everything is broken
(Bob Dylan)

Forgiveness means that brokenness doesn't have the Last Word. It's
a resurrection term: forgiveness is what enables something new to

integrated lives that Bridget was allowed to but we are also called to
let our faith inform how we live and how we exercise power.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
help us to use the faith we've found
to reshape the world around
so that you can answer prayer in us
and we in you.
Amen

(after John Bell)

Tuesday 24th July I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of
heaven and earth.

The Rev'd Martin Knight is Minister of St Paul's URC, South Croydon

Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the
earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God
said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the
light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God
called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was
evening and there was morning, the first day.

Reflection

Has all of humanity, in every age, looked up at the blazing canopy of
stars or out from the shore at the endless face of water – stilled in
awe?

Has each child cried out in discoveries wonder at the snake in the garden, only to learn its true name - 'worm'?

Have each of us had a moment of deeply knowing that we are – we simply are, by virtue of creation?

Have we, who read these reflections, had an instant of amazement when we recognise and truly know that day follows night and light illuminates the dark?

Have you been on the hill top, out in the meadow, heard Brian Cox talking about the universe or watched Blue Planet 2 and taken a breath full of wonder and worship?

At some point we rejoice to sing or say, dance or pray - 'I believe in God...'

That moment. Those deep moments cause the unfolding glory of creation to burst into ordinary lives.

The writer of Genesis cries out for us to hear God's gift in creation. This story is a best guess at creation's beginning and even if inaccurate in fact, it's success is in giving us words that express the amazement of life.

Even lives of disability, blindness, stigma, pain, exhaustion, depression, all that being human throws at us, cannot stop the wonder of creation from seeping into our experience. Some way and somehow, we will deeply know God's boundless grace and gift of love.

And so rightly, the Creed's simple statement of faith begins 'I believe in God...'

This is a sad development. We have been going to each other's Assemblies since 1844. It leads me to ponder anew what it means to have wounds in the Body of Christ and indeed in the Communion of Saints. It is particularly painful when it feels like we are inflicting wounds upon ourselves; attempting to cut off our own limbs.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never let me go* is set in a present, or near-future, dystopian version of Britain where people are cloned and raised to be organ donors; cloned people are a community apart from the rest of society. Donations eventually result in death once the clone no longer has the organs needed to survive. Not all organs are removed at once, so a clone lives a life marked by illness and pain while they wait to make their final donation. Those in the wider community debate whether the clones are people at all.

In the Communion of Saints how much can be cut off before the body dies? We are talking about the resurrected Body of Christ which surely cannot die in the same way that any other sort of body can, but continuous wounding and, at times removal of key parts, must have an impact. I give thanks that resurrection is an ongoing process. The Body of Christ is continuously being raised from the dead, often against all of the odds. But the scars remain. We are reminded that we belong to one another; whatever decisions any General Assembly, or other Council of the Church, makes we are still held together as the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are called to run the race set before us ... together.

Prayer

Christ,
we are each part of your Body, the communion of saints.

We pray for situations where your Body is wounded;
where there is disagreement and conflict.

Prayer

O God,
give us the courage to face our deepest fears and emotion,
give us safe places to express the ugliest of our thoughts,
give us grace to receive your love,
and give us an abundance of love –
enough for even our enemies
that we might pray for those who persecute us and others
and find ways bless all your children. Amen

[Monday 6th August...the communion of saints...](#)

The Rev'd Sarah Moore is President of the URC in Cumbria and a member of Carver Uniting Church, Windermere. She is also a Trustee and Director of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

Hebrews 12: 1-2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Reflection

As I write this reflection (June 2018), the General Assembly of the URC's sister denomination, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), resolved to cease offering or accepting invitations from either ourselves, or the Church of Scotland, due to the decisions of both of those churches to explore and enable same sex couples to marry.

Prayer:

Holy God
Father and Mother of Creation
As we read this reflection aware of all that is going on for us today,
Give us a moment to look around and to look in
And to know you again, as creator still creating.
I pray will every fiber of my being; I believe in God.
Amen

[Wednesday 25th July](#) I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord...

The Rev'd Michael Hopkins is Minister of Farnham and Elstead United Reformed Churches, and Clerk of the General Assembly

John 3: 16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Reflection

When we say the words 'and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord', we are using titles for Jesus rich in association and importance. The world 'Christ' means 'anointed', the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah. To be anointed, that is, to have oil put on your skin in a special ceremony, was the sign, among the Israelites as among other people, of appointment to a position of importance in the community, such as that of king or priest. The word came to refer to a high calling, a particular vocation, a divine designation for a purpose of significance. However, the anointed one came as one who served.

'His only son' is a challenge, when the whole people of Israel had been described as the son of God (Hosea 11:1), but it comes with the personal devotion of Son to Father. Jesus, of course, was son of God in a way different from the way in which we are sons and daughters of our parents.

When we speak of Jesus as 'our Lord', we run some fairly important risks. One is the danger of possessiveness in 'our', for the remaking of Christ in our particular image is a constant temptation. Another risk is the removal from our devotion of the details the Gospels give us about Jesus, with the result that Jesus is nothing more or less than an alternative word for God, defined not by his life but by some vague notion of what a God should be like.

So, may Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord show us the closest that we can see of God, and remind us of how God spires to see the best of humanity.

Prayer

Jesus Christ, barrier-breaker, lead us from our comfort zones.
We often want to surround ourselves with like-minded people;
help us to be open to those who are different.

Jesus Christ, risk-taker, free us from our fear of all that is strange.
We are often afraid of what we don't know and understand;
help us to see everyone's in your plan.

Jesus Christ, hope-giver, show us how to be like you.
We don't always willingly embrace change,
or always welcome the stranger;
Help us to open our hearts and minds,
so that your kingdom may grow. Amen.

Reflection

'Is this any way to run a country? Is there an honest politician in the house?' (The Message)

Whatever our political persuasion, we can probably all relate to a time when we have felt like that about either our own or another country's government. Injustice rightly turns our stomach.

From this familiar starting point, Psalm 54 quickly becomes very disturbing. The Psalmists have no qualms about expressing their disgust in the strongest language, and demanding blood-thirsty retribution from God. This is an uncomfortable Psalm to sing!

To claim that anyone is wicked from birth, and to wish them born dead, is extreme and at odds with our calling to nurture precious new life. Surely this has no place in our worship, particularly all-age settings? Yet it is this raw honesty that makes this vital - to admit to ourselves and to God (who knows us better than we know ourselves) that we sometimes hate more deeply than we love. There is no 'political correctness' here. In being this honest we open ourselves up to being transformed by the loving presence of God who sends sun and rain on both the wicked and the righteous, and calls us to equally radical love. There is no place for injustice in the Kingdom - but equally no place for all-consuming hate.

The slime trail of slugs and snails is not them dissolving (wishful thinking by the Psalmist!). I used to wage a one-woman war – going out every evening to collect a couple of hundred (yes really!) from my garden to protect my tender plants. I became obsessed with destroying my enemy. Then I moved – and made my piece with my fellow creature who is both duck and hedgehog fodder and helpful decomposer of vegetation. May a shift in perspective help me to love my other enemies.

Sunday 5th August Psalm 58

Dr Sam Richards is the URC's Head of Children's and Youth Work and a member of mayBe community, Oxford

1 You rulers, do you know what justice is?
Among mankind do you judge uprightly?
2 No, you devise injustice in your hearts
And on the earth you mete out cruelty.

3 Even from birth the wicked go astray
And from the womb untruthfully they speak;
Their wayward thoughts well up within their hearts
And havoc with their lying words they wreak.

4 Their poison's like the venom of a snake;
They're like a cobra that has closed its ear—
5 However great the charmer's skill may be,
It pays no heed because it does not hear.

6 Destroy, O God, the teeth within their mouths;
LORD, smite the lion's jaw a mighty blow.
7 Make them disperse as water flows away,
And blunt their arrows when they draw the bow.

8 May they be like the snail that melts away,
Or like a stillborn child that sees no sun.
9 Before a pot can boil on burning thorns,
So swiftly shall the wicked be undone.

10 The just will tread the blood of wicked men;
When they're avenged, the righteous will be glad.
11 Then all will say, "The just have their reward
Surely the judge of all the earth is God."

Thursday 26th July ...who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,...

The Rev'd Peter Clark is Minister of the Bridport & Dorchester Joint Pastorate.

St Luke 1: 35

The angel said to Mary, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'

Reflection

The Creed refers strangely to two participants in a drama we more usually encounter in wintry Advent rather than in July! Stranger yet is the faith required to believe, for, familiar as the terms 'Holy Spirit' and 'Virgin Mary' are, it is worth considering seriously for these terms challenge credibility.

God's Spirit is widely invoked throughout the Hebrew Scriptures commencing even as early Genesis 1:2 when "a wind from God (or 'the Spirit of God') swept over the face of the waters," and initiated an incredible act of creation. The Hebrew is 'Ruach' which confusingly, and delightfully, means both "Spirit' and 'Wind," just as the Greek 'Pneuma,' used in the New Testament. Thus they imply a nebulous quality to God's presence so that, despite our best efforts, we we will never be able to pin down and control the Spirit of God. It is tough, almost impossible even, to believe in such a vague and un-pin-down-able concept.

This is not as hard, however, as believing in the pregnancy of a young maiden whilst she manages to continue to maintain her virginity. And yet, that is precisely what the text implies (even if theologians with far higher academic qualifications that I shall ever

gain do sometimes argue against such a reading). But that is how I read it - a young lady somehow with child not caused by her fiancé nor by a dalliance with one of the local village boys. To me it is not about the conception being 'immaculate' i.e. without stain or sin for surely none of us seriously consider our own 'normal / natural' conception to be as a result of an act of sin? It is surely much more about the miracle and the impossibility of this happening?

So an impossible concept of God and an impossible miracle summarised in twelve words? And yet, impossibly, we and countless Christians over the years have done and continue to believe it still!

Prayer

Impossible God,
who is God of the Impossible,
fill us this day with
your Spirit of wholeness
your Spirit of fullness
your Spirit of completeness,
and conceive in us the way to express
your love
your presence
your promise,
this day and every day.
Amen

all together in Christ. Slave and free were no longer divided but were united in Christ.

The divisions that society made between male and female were removed by belonging to Jesus. As members of the URC we celebrated the centenary of the ordination of Constance Coltman in September last year. We are part of the first mainstream church to ordain a woman and in doing so we demonstrated that being in Christ removes barriers between male and female.

We in the URC are part of the wider church that is together in Christ. We live in a world where people are divided by their wealth, their colour, their gender and/or the country they were born in. There are many stories of United Reformed Churches working hard to help immigrants and others to claim what is their right despite opposition from some parts of society. We should not reinforce these divisions, but must see every person in Christ as our brother or sister and our equal in Jesus. Let us praise God that in Christ there should be no divisions in His Church.

Prayer

Loving God,
I thank you that you made me and through Christ You have transformed me to be the person I am today.
I thank you that I am part of your family, part of your great and universal church.
Help me to work for You to bring equality and fairness into this world today Amen

Prayer

Almighty God,

You give us the gift of your Holy Spirit and yet we find it hard to relinquish control of our lives and our churches.

Forgive us.

Help us to step onto the dance floor of life, help us to follow the leading of your Holy Spirit so that our life-dance reflects the life-dance of Jesus and will draw those dancing alone to accept the invitation to join in.

Amen

[Saturday 4th August ...the holy catholic Church,...](#)

John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC

Galatians 3: 26-27

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Reflection

The United Reformed Church was created by three church unions in 1972, 1981 and 2000. That simple statement does not mention the earlier unions that had created the churches that eventually united to become the URC. This is a living demonstration of the way as members of the URC we do believe in "the holy catholic church".

Why are we part of "the holy catholic church"? Paul explains that the important thing is how we have been changed by being baptized into Christ. He tells how for the Christians at that time the major divisions in society were removed. Jewish and Greek Christians were

[Friday 27th July ...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried;...](#)

The Rev'd Paul Robinson is the minister of The United Church in Rhyll

St John 19: 13 - 23

When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, 'Here is your King!' They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor.' Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth,[e] the King of the Jews.' Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier.

Reflection

In Philippians chapter 2 we read that Jesus 'who, being in very nature God... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!'

If we think for a moment what that might look like, it probably wouldn't be long before we turn to the Passion narratives, and this passage from John's gospel. Here we see that Jesus, who had all the standing in the universe to judge, was himself judged by Pilate. Here we see the King of kings and Lord of lords, being announced as king, only for the chief priests to declare they had no king but Caesar. Here we see the one who from his strength could make yokes easy and light, become weighed down with his own wooden cross that would make him stumble and fall. Here we see Jesus, who reigned over creation, now stripped naked with some soldiers dividing out the last of his earthly possessions. Here we see Jesus who having brought such healing and wholeness, has been flogged, whipped, and scourged, now with nails being driven through his hands and feet.

There is a possibility that this was just some sick story of irony; or this could be the most significant moment in the life of the universe since its creation, as the incarnate Son of God was stripped of everything, became nothing, all for love for us. This is the moment when we realise that Jesus would rather go through all this, he would rather suffer under Pontius Pilate, be crucified, die and be buried in this most brutal way - he would rather do all that, than spend another day in the glorious heavenly realms as King of the universe without you. This is the cost of great love. The cost of a grace that forgives my sin.

By his wounds I am healed.

Thanks be to God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus,
Thank-you.
Were the whole realm of nature mine,

Reflection

Recently we enjoyed an afternoon tea in the Blackpool Tower Ballroom. We watched couples of all shapes, sizes and ages glide around the ballroom to music and I remembered the Civil Service Christmas dances Mum and Dad used to take us to. Dad loved to dance and spent the evening dancing with mum, myself and my sister. He taught us having us stand on his toes so we were able to glide around the floor feeling very grown up and in control. We weren't of course, Dad was in control, and sometimes he took steps which were too long and we fell off – dissolving into giggles.

So what has this to do with the Holy Spirit?

Ballroom dancing couples are a great analogy for the relationship we can have with the Holy Spirit. Firstly it reminds us that the Holy Spirit is a person, not an 'it'. You can have a relationship with a person, but not with an 'it' and that relationship can be superficial or it can be close; it can be a one-way relationship or it can be two-way. Secondly, it reminds us that in order for the dancing couple to negotiate the dancing space without crashing into other couples, standing on each other's toes, or pulling away into different directions, one partner needs to keep an eye on the bigger picture, to know which direction and which steps will fit best and the other needs to be able to feel, hear or sense the hints and actions to enable them to follow the leading.

If we choose the Holy Spirit as our life-dance partner, he/she will be our comforter - when times are hard we can "stand on his/her toes" and close our eyes and know we will be taken the right way. The Holy Spirit will also be our teacher and our guide, he/she will teach, guide and help us walk the way and live the life of Jesus today.

than worrying about division, perhaps we should heed Christ's words and work together for justice.

If we want to ensure the salvation of all people, the focus on individual ethics is misguided. We can't merely feed the hungry and look after the sick. Rather, we must work together to end the conditions of their hunger and sickness. We can't merely give to charity or help our oppressed neighbour. Rather, we must work together to break the institutional chains which bind and oppress. We can't merely welcome and include the other. Rather, we must work together to tear apart our prejudices. Then, perhaps, we will all live in God's realm as one. May it be so.

Shepherding God,
We pray for all people on pedestals of power,
That they might learn humility, and for ourselves, that we might be humble.
We pray for all people in chains of oppression,
That they might learn boldness,
and for ourselves, that we might speak out.
Loving God,
Help us to move together as one,
To shatter oppression and break down injustice.
In your merciful name.
Amen.

[Friday 3rd August ...I believe in the Holy Spirit,...](#)

The Rev'd Sheila Coop, Minister, Macedonia URC, Failsworth

St John 15:26

'When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

that would be an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul,
my life,
my all.
Amen.

(words from Isaac Watts, 'When I survey the wondrous cross')

[Saturday 28th July ...he descended to the dead...](#)

The Rev'd Mike Walsh is a Special Category Minister in Chorlton, South Manchester

1 Peter 3:18-20

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water.

Reflection

This densely packed passage is a 'proof-text' of both conservatives and liberals to justify beliefs; whether it be evidence of Christ preaching to the dead on Holy Saturday or as conclusive evidence that Peter, writes of a spiritual, not a bodily, resurrection.

The tradition of Jesus descending to Hell has its basis in the 3rd Century Gospel of Nicodemus and the writings of Augustine. Likewise, to read this text as making a distinction between body and spirit is misunderstanding Peter's use of 'flesh' (meaning this

life/realm, not body) and 'spirit' (meaning the realms which we cannot see, not 'soul'). Furthermore, 'descended to Hell' does not appear in Western Creeds until the 700s. The parable of the Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16) suggests the dead should require no such ministry for they had the Law and the Prophets.

What then, to put it bluntly, was Peter on about?

Helpfully, the Letter gives some hints to context. Peter encourages the infant vulnerable and persecuted Church. The term 'spirits' (note he mentions neither the dead nor Hell) references the realms we can't see, in comparison to 'the flesh' (not body) the realms we can see. In the context of the vulnerable Early Church he is setting up an argument for remaining steadfast in current travails, by having confidence in that which we cannot see. Peter is pointing to Jesus' dominion over things unseen as well as seen.

Peter then links the Noah story, (someone who 'saves' the righteous through water) and the saving nature of the waters of baptism. A baptism which, in the first readers' context, was in a very real sense the cause of both their persecution in 'the flesh', but reason for their hope of salvation 'in the Spirit.' The one in who they have put their faith is the Lord of all creation, both seen and unseen.

Being a baptized follower of Christ had its cost, but stay strong says Peter, and trust in Him.

Prayer

God of all, both seen and unseen,
may we place our trust in you;
for you speak truth to powers we cannot see
and turn even the power of death to life.

Amen.

Thursday 2nd August ...and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Alex Clare-Young is an Ordinand at Westminster College, Cambridge

St Matthew 25: 31 - 33

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Reflection

This is a text that is difficult to approach without suggesting judgement and condemnation. I think, though, that a lot of the judgement is due to how we read, rather than the letter of, the text.

We focus on separation, we always have. God creates humanity, and we focus on separation by gender and sex. God provides us with a garden, and we focus on separation from God by the relentless search for knowledge. God provides us with an opportunity for reconciliation, and we respond by blaming each other for all that is wrong.

The same can be said for approaches to this text. We focus on the difference between sheep and goats, one good, the other bad. We focus on the apocalyptic message, and forget about the message for today. We focus on blame and punishment, forgetting about mercy and love.

What if this Gospel message is all about redemption? What if it is about bringing people together, rather than separating us? God brings us together, left and right, we are gathered around. Rather

and prophets did fail for millennia, however anointed they were. Ultimately, Jesus showed that he could be trusted with God's supreme power, hidden not only in the frailty of human nature, but also in the suffering and vulnerability of the Cross.

The questions we may ask ourselves this morning is: can God trust us with such supreme power? How have we, and the Church, been Christ-like stewards of that supreme power over the centuries? Is God entrusting more responsibilities and souls to believers/churches who are more trustworthy to use God's supreme power well?

Has God been training and challenging us to be more trustworthy with power by allowing some aspects of our lives to be cross-like? This should be much easier now, as we have a compassionate great High Priest before God's throne: a priest who knows how hard it is for humans to be critically faithful in this generation. He not only journeys with us through his Spirit but also intercedes for us, according to the depths of his love and riches of his glory.

Prayer:

Gracious Saviour, how awesome it is that we can now boldly approach God's throne.

Grant us the faithfulness, which makes the Father proud of us.

Renew, reform us and refocus us today, so that God's will becomes naturally ours.

Help us dream your dreams and enact your visions.

Grant us the grace to be good stewards of the power and authority, so generously made available to us and to your Church. Amen

Sunday 29th July Psalm 57

The Revd Nigel Uden, a URC minister in Cambridge and Moderator of the General Assembly

1 Have mercy on me, Lord;
to you my soul holds fast.
Your cov'ring wings will shelter me
until the danger's past.

2 I cry to God Most High,
to God who answers me,
For he fulfils his purposes
for me most perfectly.

3 He sends his help from heaven
and saves me from above,
Rebuking those who seek my life;
God sends his truth and love.

4 I live with savage beasts,
I dwell with lions strong—
With men who speak with piercing words;
a sharp sword is their tongue.

5 Above the highest heavens,
O God, exalted be!
And over all the earth below
display your majesty.

6 My soul was overwhelmed;
they spread a net for me.
But they themselves fell in the pit
which they dug secretly.

7 My heart is steadfast, Lord;
with music I will sing.
8 Awake, my soul! Wake, harp and lyre!
My song the dawn will bring.

9 Among the nations, Lord,
to you I will give praise.
Among the peoples of the earth
my songs of you I'll raise.

10 Great is your steadfast love,
which reaches to the sky.
Your constant faithfulness, O Lord,
extends to heaven high.

11 Above the highest heavens,
O God, exalted be!
And over all the earth below
display your majesty.

Reflection

Psalms 57 has Saul and David seriously at odds - 'I live with savage beasts'. David escapes to a cave and we learn of what comes to his spiritual rescue: 'with music I will sing.' Having once calmed Saul by playing the lyre, in his own distress, he now makes melody. And his sense of God's steadfast love is re-kindled: 'my song the dawn will bring.'

Not all life's difficulties are about failed relationships, but most of us pass through shadowlands and need ways to cope with them. Maybe music works for you. One of my own 'go to' pieces is the slow

Give us the courage to walk your way
and to be crucified for your sake,
as we look towards the glory of your divinity around us,
in the Church and the world. Amen.

[Wednesday 1st August](#) ...he is seated at the right hand of the Father,

*The Rev'd Bachelard Kaze, Minister, Eastwood, Langley, Marlpool
Pastorate*

Hebrews 1: 1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Reflection

Who would we call our 'right-hand' person and why? As far as I am concerned, it could be someone who has demonstrated their faithfulness to me in difficult times; someone, who has demonstrated that he/she respects me, values me above much else; someone whose faithfulness to me is costly and who also shares my heart, my values and my priorities. I suspect that you must wonder whether a real human being can really tick all those boxes. For many, it might be a best friend, a spouse or a partner.

Jesus has certainly won the right to sit at God's right hand. He has managed to humbly reflect God's heart and glory on earth, through a 'critical fidelity' (costly faithfulness). Jesus succeeded where angels

Reflection

In the Ascension Chapel at Walsingham, a sculpted cloud on the ceiling has two feet hanging from it. Two wounded feet are seen in frozen animation, held there in the sculpture while the rest of the body is hidden from view. With the scars of the wounds on the feet, the observer is left in no doubt that these are the feet of the crucified and risen Christ, the physical body of Christ no longer present as he has ascended – or is ascending – to heaven.

The thought of Jesus as ‘ascended’ can cause us some difficulties. The term comes into our Christian vocabulary through the anglicization of the Latin version of the Bible, the Vulgate, while in the Greek both Luke and Acts suggest Jesus was ‘carried’ or ‘lifted’ up to heaven. Perhaps we hear the echo of John’s gospel (3.14 & 12.32) where Christ will be lifted up – glorified – so that all people may see God’s work in the world. Ascension transports Jesus to the place of glory where, lifted up, the wounded human body becomes at one with the divine.

But without motion, it’s unclear whether the feet in the sculpture are going up or coming down. Is Jesus disappearing from view, never to be seen again, or returning to be among us? Or are we, as observers, to be reminded that the ascension of Christ to heaven does not absent us from the duties of Christian discipleship? Perhaps instead of being the last sight of a saviour who has left humanity behind, they remind us of the journey our feet need to take as we walk the way of Christ’s disciples, that we too may live as crucified with him, our risen and ascended Lord.

Prayer

God of the world,
as you were lifted up to heaven,
help us not to look for you in the clouds
but to live as your faithful disciples.

movement from Mahler’s Third Symphony. Its seering melody, occasional brass climaxes, and lingering spaciousness unfailingly restore me. As a Youtube commentator has it, ‘When I am dying, I would listen to this music.’

Other things can also take us back to God, like a gym workout, or a riverside ramble. I used to visit a devout church member whose world was being re-shaped by advanced dementia; all she ever said was ‘no light’. It was harrowing. With David, she seemed to be trapped in a net, beyond communication. So we sang hymns she knew off by heart, like ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.’ In her eyes, it was as if her steadfastness of old, for that moment renewed her grasp upon God’s steadfastness; ‘my song the dawn will bring’. It was deeply touching.

Amidst life’s trials, let Psalm 57 take you to a cave not just to escape what’s wrong, but also in song or something else to encounter afresh the one whose constant faithfulness, so exquisitely shown in Christ, extends to heaven high.

Prayer

God, whose love is
an enduring melody
of passion and peace,
whether our songs be of
candid lament or gentle gratitude,
may they nourish our faith
and exalt your name,
through Jesus Christ. Amen

Monday 30th July On the third day he rose again;...

The Rev'd Ruth Browning is a retired minister and member of Thornbury URC in Gloucestershire

St Luke 24: 1 - 5

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

Reflection

Luke's gospel pays more attention to women than any of the others, so by reading as far as v.10 "they" of verse 1 is expanded to an explanatory list. The arrangement to meet at dawn at the grave was necessary for the women who were outside Jerusalem to walk round the outside of the walls, those who were inside had to wait for the gates to be unlocked at dawn. The need to wait for daylight meant they could not perform this duty as soon as the Sabbath ended at sunset. Consequently, by counting inclusively this gives us three days. The day of the crucifixion being day 1, the sabbath being day 2 and this, the first day of the week, is the third day.

They supposed it would take a group of them to roll the stone sealing the tomb and must have been relieved if puzzled when they spotted it was moved. Until the startling appearance of 2 dazzling men asking "Why look for the living among the dead?" What a thing to ask! He had been crucified, dead. They knew he was dead, they all

had experience of preparing the dead for burial. Life and death were not the sanitised experiences of the 21st Century but raw, hands on, familiar in every family; Joseph of Arimathea was unlikely to be mistaken.

Perhaps they barely took in the following sentence "he is risen", as they shielded their eyes from the dazzle and grappled with what must have sounded like the wrong question. No one would have bothered to ensure women were familiar with philosophic discussions of the meaning of prophecies. They knew something about prophecies of Messiah but the idea that he would be killed, dead, buried and would rise was obscure. So "he is risen" is a bombshell that we cannot replicate, much better to keep it simple with the statement "after three days he rose again".

Prayer

Lord, in all our lives things happen which are difficult to understand and even more to explain. Help us to keep open minds so that dazzling revelations of your truth can be absorbed and handed on. Amen.

Tuesday 31st July ...he ascended into heaven,

The Rev'd Dr Matthew Prevett, Minister, St Andrew's URC, Monkseaton and Northern Synod.

St Luke 25: 51

While Jesus was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.