

Sunday 20 October 2024, Trinity 21 Parish Eucharist
Isaiah 53.4-12, Hebrews 5.1-10, Mark 10.35-45
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

If I were to ask you what the heart of the Christian faith is, what would you say? And how would your answer fit in with the answers your parents or grandparents might have given? What might your children say is the heart of the Christian faith?

It's a tough job, standing up here in this pulpit and preaching. Sometimes it feels like the clergy are expected to have all the answers, or at least be able to point in the right direction. So much, it seems, depends on us. And that kind of weight is too great for anyone to bear.

So I'm going to fall back on the Church's answers today, not by way of cop-out, but in order to give way to a greater authority than myself. I hope what I'm about to say using the Church's voice is in accord with what you just heard in our readings from Isaiah, Hebrews, and Mark. Because the scriptures are the ultimate source of the Church's voice. And therefore, they ought to be the source of mine as preacher.

What is the heart of the Christian faith? According to St Paul's letter to Timothy, written around 66AD. *There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all... He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.* This quote is perhaps one of the first 'creeds', or statements of faith, of the Church.

What is the heart of the Christian faith? Polycarp, who learned the faith at the feet of an aged St John, wrote to the church at Philippi: *Let us then continually persevere in our hope, and the earnest of our righteousness, which is Jesus Christ, who bore our sins in His own body on the tree, who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth, but endured all things for us, that we might live in Him.*

What is the heart of the Christian faith? Ignatius, a friend of Polycarp who died a martyr's death in the Colosseum, wrote to the church at Ephesus: *Let my spirit be counted as nothing for the sake of the cross, which is a stumbling-block to those that do not believe, but to us salvation and life eternal.*

What is the heart of the Christian faith? As we confess in the words of the Nicene Creed first drafted in 325 AD: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.* This longer statement of faith is, I think, not so unlike the first from St Paul to Timothy.

I could go on recounting to you summaries of faith and statements of belief from all the ages of the Church and, after a while, they would all begin to sound the same. Because the Church has believed and taught from the beginning that the heart of the Christian faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is, his life, his death, and his resurrection. If you believe nothing more than that Jesus was born, died, and raised from the dead, your faith is Christian. But Christian faith cannot be less than that, it cannot be less than Jesus' person and his work, because without Jesus the Christ, the messiah of God, there is no Christianity. And that should be a challenge to us all and an opportunity.

First, it is a challenge which should prompt us to ask, 'What is the heart of my faith?' Is the heart of your faith the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Is your faith the faith of the Church throughout the ages?

Second, it is an opportunity to revisit that simple truth that is the heart of our faith. It is an opportunity to return to the manger, the cross, and the tomb and look again at the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, the man naked and bloody, and the body wrapped in linen and spices.

What is the heart of the Christian faith? No more and no less than Jesus Christ who, according to Isaiah *was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed*. No more and no less than Jesus Christ who, according to the writer to the Hebrews *offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. No more and no less than Jesus Christ who, according to St Mark's gospel *came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*. No more and no less than Jesus Christ, the one whose life and work is more than enough to save the world and to save you and me.

I don't need to stand up here with the weight of having the right answer on my back because the Church, which is the people of God from every time and place, has already given us all the answer who is Jesus in whom we believe and in whom we trust and who we worship with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength here in the beauty of holiness. Just Jesus, no more and no less. He is always the answer. I hope he will always be your answer too, and the heart of your faith, and of the faith of your children and their children after them.

All for Jesus, all for Jesus,
this the church's song must be,
till, at last, we all are gathered,
one in love and one in thee. Amen.