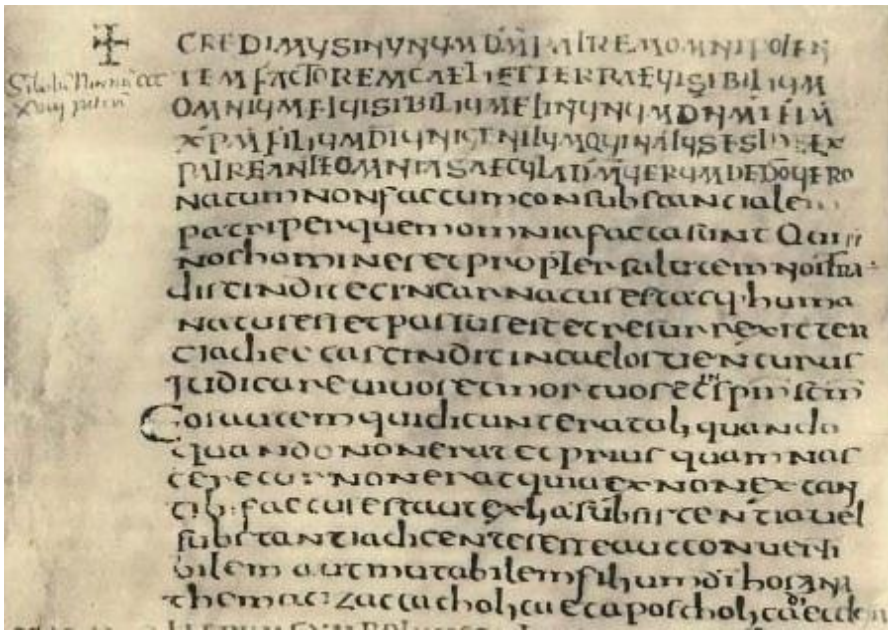


I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed



I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

He descended to the dead. On the third day He arose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Introduction

For many the Apostles' Creed is familiar and they can recite by heart. But for many others, it is unfamiliar.

Why you may ask are we beginning our new teaching year by considering the Apostles' Creed?

As Christians we increasingly live within a society of deeply entrenched relativism. A world in which conflicting ideas and commitments can apparently be held by the same person seemingly without contradiction or problem. We live in an age when, for many, the passion behind the belief is perhaps of greater importance than the belief itself, and in which the value of a belief is gauged not by the content of it but by the vociferousness of the proponent. The creed reminds us that it's not just the passion of the belief that matters but also the content of what we believe to be true.

Also present in our society in ever more obvious ways is the drive towards the privatization of faith and belief - the notion that it doesn't really matter what one believes as long as it works for you and that belief is to be held in private and is not to be heard or seen in public. The drive to ever more privatized religion brings the danger of a dilution of shared commitments of faith and a diluted personal faith without reference to any doctrine or commitments beyond itself.

In studying the creed we'll think through what commitments of belief stand at the heart of the Christian life. This will help us to engage with the tenets of faith that define a Christian, and without which the label 'Christian' is undermined and made nonsensical.

The Apostles' Creed is a helpful tool in achieving this end. It doesn't engage with the more controversial aspects of Christian ethics and it's not concerned with the interpretation of rules for Christian living. It's concerned simply with stating the central doctrines of Christian faith – the things around which Christians gather and which enable us to live as disciples today and tomorrow.

So that is the rationale behind the series – but it's not simply about the discussion of doctrinal information, although this is a part of it - it's also about exploring what lies behind the words 'I believe...' and unpacking what it means today for us to place our trust in the realities that 'I believe...'

Archbishop Rowan Williams helpfully develops this, writing that:

"...the opening words of the Christian statements of faith, the creeds, are about just this [trust]. This doesn't always appear straight away, though. We say, 'I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth'. The form of words might initially remind us of questions like, 'Do you believe in UFO's or ghosts?'... questions about something 'out there' whose existence is doubtful..."

and Archbishop Rowan continues:

" 'I believe in God the Father almighty' isn't the first in a set of answers to the question, 'how many ideas or pictures have I inside my head?' as if God were the name of one more doubtful thing like UFO's and ghosts to add to the furniture of my imagination. It is the beginning of a series of statements about where I find the anchorage of my life, where I find solid ground, home." (source: "Tokens of Trust")

In the course of our eight week series we will be laying out this 'solid ground' and which is 'home' for Christians. So for many, our series will refresh and I pray, deepen faith. For others in the church, it maybe that in the course of this series they will discover what this 'solid ground' is for the first time and come 'home'.

So together we will help each other to find the true anchorage of our lives and souls – the trustworthy reality of God. This is why, writing from personal experience, King David wrote:

*"I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;
He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God..." (Psalm 40: 1-3a)*

This is why we are beginning our new term considering the Apostles' Creed,

Some History:

The Apostles' Creed is one of a number of creedal formulations, which succinctly state orthodox Christian doctrine and belief. It is shorter than the equally well-known Nicene Creed.

The creed is known as the "Apostles' Creed" because a 5th century tradition claims that the 12 Apostles dictated the creed. It was well known before the 5th century and is likely to have been used to teach and prepare candidates for Baptism.

The earliest known written copy of the creed dates from AD215.

Today, the Apostles' Creed is accepted by all Christian churches and is part of the liturgy of all formal services within the Church of England.



Sermon 1 September 2, 2012: The Creed: What and Why?

Reading: James 2:14-24
(optional supplementary Romans 3:21-26)

Background:

The English word “creed” derives from the Latin word *credo* that means statement of faith.

The origins of the Apostle’s Creed can be found in the New Testament. There are frequent calls to “baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38; 8:12; 10:48), or “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:16; 19:5). In its simplest form, the earliest Christian creed seems to have been simply, “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11). The Christian is one who “receives Jesus Christ as Lord” (Colossians 2:6).

This is a powerful statement to make as it involves two related claims:

1. It declares the believer’s loyalty and commitment to Jesus Christ. To recognize that Jesus is Lord is to accept that He is Lord of all our life and to seek to do His will not ours.
2. To declare that Jesus is Lord declares certain things about Jesus i.e. his identity, relationship to God and purpose.

There is more to Christian faith than simply accepting biblical doctrines. The Creed summarizes what Christians believe and leads to a response.

Ice-breaker:

Can you think of occasions when you have publically given your assent to something? Why did you do this & what are the implications of your assent?

(Hint: Marriage vows; oath of allegiance to Queen when enlisting in the armed forces, police, church, guides and scouts; swearing an oath before giving testimony as a witness in court etc.)

Study:

The Apostles Creed begins with a powerful assertion: “I Believe.” It is repeated three times in the Creed. In this session, we’ll explore what this means.

Read James 2:14-19 9 (see Hint)

1. Apart from affirming that God exists, what else is implied in the statement “*I believe in God*”?
2. In what ways is faith like an “anchor”? How have you experienced this in your own life?
3. What do you see as the relationship between faith and good works?
4. What does the author of James mean by a “half-way” believer? How would you help someone in this position come to a firmer faith?
5. What would you say to someone who said that they would like to believe but have difficulty overcoming their doubts?

Conclusion:

Think of a person or situation that is on your heart at the moment. Take a few moments to consider and pray how your faith can help you with this person/situation.

Conclude with a time of sharing and prayer.

Helpful Hint:

To believe in Jesus as Lord must transform us.

Faith involves:

- Assent to Christ and Christian doctrine
- Trusting in God
- Commitment to God i.e. to grow in spiritual maturity as a disciple of Christ
- Obedience to God through the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit i.e. to live as a servant of Christ in the kingdom of God

This passage from James highlights the emptiness of faith without action.



Sermon 2 September 9, 2012: God The Father

Readings: Matthew 7: 9-11; Psalm 8

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.....”

Background:

Saying ‘I believe’ is actually a statement of trust.

Within society at large, trust is in crisis. After numerous scandals we no longer trust our political leaders. Bank bailouts and corporate pension scams have undermined our trust in businesses. Phone hacking has dented our trust in the media. Confidence and trust in all institutions, including sadly, the church is low. Wherever we turn, we find an attitude towards individuals and corporations that is at best sceptical. This lack of trust is perhaps based on the unspoken conviction that these individuals and institutions do not have our best interests in mind or work for our advantage – that their agenda and purpose is hostile.

It is in this culture of distrust that we’re invited to make a statement of absolute trust.

The first line of the creed begins *“I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty...”* in this short sentence we affirm, not simply that we assent to the existence of God in an abstract meta-physical sort of way, but that in affirming his existence we also place our trust in him.

In order to place our trust in him we must believe that God is trustworthy, that he is not out to deceive us or harm us.

Rowan Williams, in his book “Tokens of Trust” illustrates this using the well-known parable in John’s Gospel, chapter 9. Having cured a blind man, Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man. The man asks, who this Son of Man is? Jesus replies that it is him. Clearly the question is not about whether the now cured man believes in the existence of the Son of Man - after-all Jesus is standing in front of him. His question is whether the man is ready to trust the Son of Man. The man responds “I believe”, and in responding he affirms that he has confidence that the Son of Man is not out to harm him or deceive him even that the Son of Man is working for him, on his behalf.

Ice-breaker:

Consider sharing an occasion when your trust has been broken? How did you feel and how this affected you?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

1. **Read Matthew 7: 9-11.** How do you understand God to be our Father?
2. **Read Psalm 8.** Take a moment to remember a time when you have been struck by the wonder of creation. Share this with others in your group.
3. Psalm 8 reminds us that God is the author and maintainer of creation. He is the Alpha and the Omega (the beginning and the end) who holds time in His hands. He is the *"...Almighty..."*
How does this reality help us in our faith? Remembering that God is our Father first and then "Almighty"?
4. God the Father Almighty is also *"creator of heaven and earth."*
How do you think this affects what we believe and how we are to live?

Conclusion:

Go outside and admire the night sky or go for a short walk and take note of your surroundings. Either pray together outside or return inside and use your experience as an aid to prayer.

Helpful Hints:

1. God is the perfect Father. God is the ultimate source of our existence, just as our human fathers brought us into being. God created his children in love and loves them faithfully and individually, seeking for each one to realize their full potential in His family.

Just as there is something of our Fathers in each of us, so we are made in the image of our heavenly Father (Genesis 1:26-27). We can see and know God through Jesus (John 14:9). Think of the love, care, kindness we see reflected in the character and life of Jesus. This is what the love of God for us is like.

God exercises loving authority over us as do human fathers. Just as a human father may say "no" to some requests because they are not in our best interests, so with God the Father in heaven. But His love and motivation are always pure, faithful and for our good.

- 2 & 3. Everything that we see and experience in our world was created by God and belongs to God. This moves us to praise God and also to be stewards of His creation as God decreed in Genesis.

What's more, God is at work all the time caring for His creation. He is involved and active in His creation. We are not alone.

We are part of His creation, the central part, and have been fashioned by God. We are here because God wants us to be here. And God is with us, caring for us as the perfect Father.

The world reflects the wisdom, power and majesty of God who brought it into being (see Romans 1:20). God is awesome. But through Christ, we can know our awesome God personally. And He has the desire and ability to care for each and every person individually for our good. So we are to trust and follow Him.



Sermon 3 September 16, 2012: God The Son: His identity & birth

Readings: Matthew 1: 18-21; John 5:16-27

"I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...."

Background:

The focus of the Creed is the name and relevance of Jesus Christ. As previously mentioned, it is generally thought that the Creed represents an expansion of a very simple and basic confession of faith: "Jesus is Lord!"

The core of the Christian faith is person, not a set of abstract ideas and beliefs. We must resist the temptation to speak of Christianity as if it were some form of "ism", like Buddhism, Freudianism or Marxism. These are essentially abstract systems that have become detached from the person of their founder and reduced to sets of ideas or doctrines. What's more, their founders were human and are all dead. Jesus is alive, active in his home in the glory of heaven and will return to complete the kingdom of God when the Father decides.

Ice-breaker:

All names have a meaning. This was particularly important in times past. If you know what your name means, share it with your group.

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

Read Matthew 1:18-21 & John 5:16-27

1. Do you know what the name "*Jesus*" means? Why were Mary and Joseph instructed by the angel to use this name for their first-born child?
2. Do you think it matters that Jesus Christ is "*the son of God*"? If so, why?
3. **Read Acts 2:36.** What do you understand the word "*Lord*" to mean? How and why is Jesus "*Lord*"? What are the implications for us?
4. The Creed continues, "***...who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary....***" Why do you think that the virgin birth is vital to Christianity?

Conclusion:

Conclude by sharing in a time of prayer knowing that God loves each one of us and is at work for good. We are to rest in Him, seek His help and trust Him as we serve Him.

Helpful Hints:

1. The name Jesus literally means “God saves.” Strictly speaking, as Christ is actually a title not a surname we ought to say/write “Jesus the Christ.” In calling Jesus “*the Christ*”, the New Testament writers are intentionally pointing to Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. (The word “Christ” is the Greek version of the Hebrew word “Messiah” see John 1: 41.)
2. Although all believers are sons (and daughters for that matter) of God in some sense of the word, Jesus is singled out as *the* Son of God. Paul distinguishes between Jesus as the *natural* son of God and believers as *adopted* sons (Romans 8:23; 9:4; Ephesians 1:5). In 1 John, Jesus is referred to as “*the Son*”, while believers are designated as “*children*”. We have a different relationship to God our Father compared to Jesus. There is something quite distinct about Jesus’ relationship to God the Father, as expressed in the title “Son of God”.

For the Apostles’ Creed, saying that Jesus is “*the Son of God*” amounts to saying that Jesus is God. We’ll explore this in our sermons and in later sessions. It is the belief which is often referred to as “the incarnation” – that God became man in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). This belief is vitally important for the following two reasons:

- a. Foundational to the gospel is the fact that we are saved (put right with God) through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Acts 4:12). No human can secure the forgiveness of sin.
 - b. Only God is to be worshipped (see Exodus 20:3-7). Fulfilling prophecies, and through his ministry, life, death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus revealed that He was the son of God and is to be worshipped as He is part of the Trinity that is God.
3. The title “*Lord*” is used throughout the Old Testament to refer to God (e.g. Genesis 12:1; Exodus 3:2). New Testament writers use it in the same way. Interestingly, Jesus refers to God as “*the Lord*” on several occasions (e.g. Matthew 4:10; 22:37). But an astonishing new development has taken place – it is now Jesus who is regularly referred to as “*the Lord*” (e.g. Philippians 2:11; 3:8; Colossians 2:6). We therefore deduce that something of vital importance about Jesus’ status is being said. But what and why?

The confession that “*Jesus is Lord*” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3) was regarded by Paul as a superb summary of the gospel. They are those who have “*received Christ Jesus as Lord*” (Colossians 2:6). Through the resurrection, God has established Jesus Christ as Lord and publically declared this to all of humanity (e.g. Acts 2:36). “*Jesus is Lord*” means that Jesus has been given the same status as God himself. It is the affirmation that Jesus has the right to lordship over us just as God has.

4. The Creed now changes pace. Having told us what to believe about Jesus, it begins to explore the foundations of these beliefs. The words of the Creed now take us back to Christmas before taking us rapidly onwards to the events of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day (Resurrection Day) as it unfolds the historical events on which the gospel is firmly founded.

We begin with the circumstances of the birth of Jesus. This section of the Creed takes us the key elements of two well-known passages from the Bible – Matthew 1:18-24 and Luke 1: 26-38.

The implication of the virgin birth will be developed in the sermons. Briefly, the virgin birth is of crucial importance because:

- a. It fulfills Old Testament prophecies (e.g. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23). Accordingly, the virgin birth confirms the identity and purpose of Christ; confirms the character, purpose and sovereignty of God who is in control working out His plan of salvation in His time.
 - b. It tells that Jesus is both divine and man. If Jesus Christ was not both divine and human our redemption would be impossible. This will be explored in the sermons.
 - c. The virgin birth also matters because it would provide an important defence against early opposition to Christianity that suggested that Jesus was the illegitimate child of Mary (it is possible that this is hinted at in John 8:41).
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Sermon 4 September 23, 2012: God The Son: His death and resurrection

Readings: Matthew 20:17-30; Matthew 27:
11-31 & John 20:1-23

“...(Jesus) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day He arose again...”

Background:

Some Christians are surprised that Pontius Pilate is mentioned in the Creed. It is important that Pilate is mentioned because the reference to the Governor of Judea (from AD26 to 36) anchors the Apostles' Creed to history. It affirms that the crucifixion of Christ actually took place. The gospel is not like a fairy tale that happened long, long ago in a far away place. No. The central, universe-changing event of all time took place in a definite place at a definite time for a definite reason (Luke 3:1-3).

Ice-breaker:

Why do you think people doubt the resurrection? How would you reply to their objections?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

Read Matthew 20:17-30

1. Realising that Jesus knew His destiny and willingly obeyed, how does this influence your understanding of God the father, Jesus and your journey of discipleship?
2. **Read Matthew 27: 11-31.** What does Christ's unjust suffering tell us?
3. ***“...(Jesus) was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to the dead....”*** How do you think the disciples felt at this point as they witnessed the vicious death of Christ?
4. Why did Jesus die? Was God absent?
5. **Read John 20:1-23.** Without the resurrection, Christianity is pointless. Do you agree/disagree and why?

Helpful Hints:

1. The unjust public trials of Jesus and his cruel beating represent the reaction of so many people to Christ. Within the Creed, Pilate represents the rejection of Jesus Christ by the world – a major theme of the New Testament.
2. Secondly, the public nature of what we now call Holy Week made it impossible for anyone

then, and now, to deny that these events happened.

3. Thirdly, the cruelty that Christ endured to the point of the most barbaric death imaginable testifies to the love of God on Christ for us and his faithfulness. It also prepares us to appreciate the power of God to transform anything and everything for His good. The close relationship between suffering and redemption is brought out in Isaiah 52:13-53:12.
4. Finally, the suffering of Christ reminds us of His humanity and helps us to know that God truly understands human suffering.

God was not absent when His son was dying on the cross. He was working to transform it from a sense of hopelessness and helplessness to one of joy and hope. God's love and power were *demonstrated*, not contradicted, by the death of the Son (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). This is why the day that Christ died to atone for our sins and provide the means for all who accept Him as Lord a Saviour to be restored to a vibrant personal relationship with God is called 'Good' Friday.

Thinking about Good Friday also brings us to us how unreliable experience and feelings can be as guides to the presence of God. Those around the cross didn't experience the presence of God – so they concluded that He was absent from the scene. The resurrection of Christ overturns that judgement: God was present in a hidden manner, which experience mistook for his absence. Jesus had told his disciples that he would rise but, in the desperation of the times, that promise (Matthew 20: 17-19) had been forgotten, perhaps even doubted.

The first Good Friday reminds us of the need to trust in the divine promises made to us, rather than rely upon our own feelings, experiences and thoughts.

Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose again *“so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”* (Hebrews 2:14-15).

The resurrection is vital to Christianity. It confirms the divinity, power and purpose of God. Satan is defeated. The resurrection tells us that the kingdom of God is real, active and victorious. That God is sovereign and is at work as He promised. Because of the resurrection, all who accept Christ as Lord receive new life in the kingdom of God - *“Life in all its fullness”* (John 10:10). 1 Peter 1: 3-4 tells us:

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.”

The power, the Holy Spirit, that raised Christ from the dead is available to all Christians so that they can be set free from death and *everything* else that Satan may use to try to bind, burden and separate people from the love of God in Christ Jesus. So Christians are to be people of peace, hope and love. Jesus is alive and is working His purposes out. He is Emmanuel (God with us) so may we worship Him, trust Him and serve Him.



I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

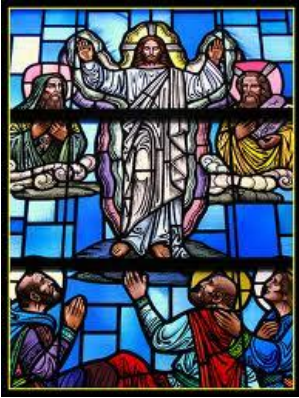
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried. He descended to the dead.

On the third day He arose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

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Sermon 5 (of 8) September 30, 2012:

God The Son: His ascension and judgement

Readings: Acts 1: 1-11; Matthew 25; 31-46

“...He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

Background:

The Creed now forwards from Easter Day to Ascension Day. This took place forty days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3) and is therefore celebrated in the Christian calendar on the sixth Thursday after Easter.

As we have considered in past studies, through Jesus' death on the cross (in place of all humanity) and resurrection to life, Jesus atones for all of humanity's sins. In so doing, Jesus provides the way for all who believe in Him as personal Lord and Saviour to be forgiven of their sins and restored to a personal relationship with God to live life today, tomorrow and for eternity as beloved citizens of the kingdom of God

In the resurrection, Jesus was liberated from the bonds of death. He is no longer confined to human existence. He has completed the will of the Father – to secure our salvation. Accordingly, Jesus must return to his rightful place in heaven. So the ascension is the return of the glorified Jesus to his rightful place. Here, in the splendour of heaven, Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father and continues his ministry. Then, as Jesus and scripture teaches, he will return in glory, at a date and time of God the Father's choosing, to judge everyone and complete the kingdom of God.

Ice-breaker:

Can you think of a time when you have been away from loved ones, from home, for a lengthy period of time? How did you feel when you returned home? Why do you think we sometimes say, 'it's good to be home'?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

5. **Read Acts 1:1-11.** How did the disciples react to Jesus' ascension? How does their reaction speak to us in our life in Christ today?
6. By returning to heaven, is Jesus absent from the world?
7. What is Jesus doing in heaven?

Having dealt with Jesus in the past and the present, the Creed now points to the future: Jesus will one day return as judge of all, whether alive or dead at the time. Older versions of the Creed use

the phrase “the quick and the dead.” “Quick” is an Old English word for “living”, which still survives in words such as “quicksilver” (mercury, which is a liquid metal at room temperature), and “quicksands”.

Read Matthew 25: 31-46

8. What do you understand by the second coming of Christ?
9. How do you feel about the fact that the Bible teaches that everyone will appear before God and be judged?

Helpful Hints:

1. Following Jesus’ ascension to the glory of heaven and the appearance of two angels, the response of the disciples is interesting and important. We read that they don’t remain standing, rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by Christ’s return to heaven. Their thoughts return immediately to earth – for God’s work must continue. Jesus has passed on his work, the work of God the Father, to them, his followers. The ascended Christ commissioned His followers: *“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”* (Matthew 28:18-19)

Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles (notice the book is called the *acts* of the apostles), that the disciples left the mountain of the ascension and plunged themselves headlong into the needs of the world for which Christ died*. They preach and heal; they live the good news in word and deed. Faith in the ascension does not mean a reduced interest in the world. Quite the opposite. Faith in the ascension means a renewed commitment to the world to be the conduits through which God builds his kingdom, bringing heaven to earth today, tomorrow and until Christ returns to complete His work of transformation.

* An interesting application is that Christians are not to dwell on the “mountain top” experiences of intimacy with God. We are called to live in the “valleys and plains” (i.e. in the ordinariness of life) in Christ for Christ. Notice also that Christians intentionally choose to enter these places and get stuck in. God is in the ordinary, everyday as much as on the “mountain tops” (the times of particular intimacy and revelation).

2. As we read the book of Acts, it is impossible to gain the impression that Jesus is no longer present with his people. The ascension does not mean, and was never intended to mean, that Christ is restricted to heaven. Quite the opposite. Through the resurrection, Christ broke down the barriers of time and space, allowing himself to be available to all (symbolized by the ripping of the temple curtain, see Matthew 27:51).

The ascension assures that Christ, who came to earth in humility and ignominy, has returned to his rightful place and way. He has been exalted and glorified and His love, power and glory can be revealed and reflected in our own lives. The ascended Christ lives

in believers through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 2:20). The Christ who was exalted to heaven may also be exalted in our lives (Philippians 1:20). He is able to knock at the door of our lives (Revelation 3:20-21) and through faith in Him, connect us with God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. We must not allow the limitations of our reason and imaginations to impose restrictions on what the risen and exalted Christ can do!

3. The Creed states that Jesus now sits at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1). This is a very powerful image which suggests two important ideas:

a. Favour and status – To be allowed to sit at the right hand of a dignitary is a special favour (Psalm 16:8; 110:1). Not even the angels are entitled to sit at God's right hand (Hebrews 1:13). Jesus's place in heaven confirms his unique status, relationship and role in the Trinity.

Jesus is enthroned beside God the Father, crowned with glory and honour (Hebrews 2:7-9), on account of the victory he secured at Calvary through obedience to the Father's will. The mocking crown of thorns has been replaced with a glorious crown of gold. In the book of Revelation, this scene is described by John: "*Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!*" (Revelation 5:12)

b. Jesus has the Father's ear – The New Testament tells us that the risen, ascended, glorified Christ intercedes for us (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). Sitting at God's right hand, Jesus is able (and does) plead our case for us to God the Father. Jesus is the intermediary between God and humanity. Christians pray in the name of Jesus Christ, acknowledging that the effectiveness of their prayers rest upon what Jesus Christ has achieved in the past, and will achieve in the future.

4. The Son of God, Jesus, who once came to this earth in great humility, will at the date and time of God the Father, return again in glory. The saving plan of God, inaugurated in the first coming of Jesus Christ, will reach its grand finale with his second coming. Every person, dead and alive, will appear before Christ and be judged. All who have accepted him as Lord and Saviour will then live with God in the fullness of his love with Him in heaven for eternity. The kingdom of God will then be completed and endure forever. Everyone who does not know Christ as personal Lord and Saviour will be banished from the presence of God forever. This is hell.

10. Many people find the biblical teaching of judgement to be uncomfortable. I hope that the following summary points may be helpful.

a. We are judged by the Lord who knows us totally, as we truly are.

- b. We will be judged by the Lord who is totally committed to us. The cross reveals Gods love for us (John 3:16) as well as his judgement upon us.
- c. God is holy, pure, loving, trustworthy and just. God will always be true to His character and purpose. He has to judge and His justice will be just.

Judgment is the necessary and final part of God's salvation plan.



Sermon 6 (of 8) October 7th, 2012:

God The Holy Spirit

Readings: John 16:5-15; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

“...I believe in the Holy Spirit...”

Background:

Christians believe that God is Trinitarian - three in one. Having considered faith in God the Father and God the Son, the Creed turns to consider the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

You may like to recall the following teaching series and accompanying notes on “The Holy Spirit” from last year and “The Call” in September 2010 (see church website <http://www.stjohnsburscough.org/WhatsHappening/Resources/The%20Call.pdf>). Also, you may like recall the teaching given on the Alpha course on the weekend.

Briefly, to get us going as we prepare for further consideration in this session....

The Holy Spirit is:

- part of the Trinity and has always existed (e.g. Genesis 1:1)
- a person and can be known
- brings God’s life to His creation (e.g. Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37: 1-14)
- brings God’s presence and power in His for His glory

And we will learn more about what, how and why the Holy Spirit works in this session.

From our reading of the gospels, we learn how Jesus was described as being “*full of the Spirit*” (e.g. Luke 4:1). How it was that the Spirit guided Jesus (e.g. Matthew 4:1). And how, after his ascension, Jesus instructed his disciples to wait to receive the Holy Spirit (God’s empowering presence) at Pentecost to continue his work (John 16:7; Acts 1:4-5)

Ice-breaker:

Have you ever found yourself lost and alone, perhaps as a child you became separated from your parents on a trip out?

How did you feel during this time?

What does such an experience tell us that we ‘need’ as a person?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

1. **Read John 16:5-15.** From what Jesus said, what is the role of the Holy Spirit? You may like to look at **2 Corinthians 3:18.**
2. How have you and do you acknowledge the presence and work of the Holy Spirit within you?

3. **Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11.** What is the difference between the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit and the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit?
4. What gifts do you, and others, discern in you and how are you employing them for the good of the kingdom of God?

Helpful Hints:

1. As Jesus prepares to leave his disciples, he promises to send them a “*comforter/counsellor*”. The Holy Spirit resides within every believer to work as God’s empowering presence.

In the following ways, the Holy Spirit works as our “*comforter/counsellor*”:

- a) The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin
- b) The Holy Spirit is a pledge of our salvation. God “*put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come*” (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:14). In many hire-purchase agreements, the buyer has to put down a deposit or a down payment to secure possession of the item. The deposit promises that there is more payment to come and also ensures possession of the item. God places His Spirit (His presence, His power) within our hearts as a down payment: it demonstrates that we are His and promises that there is more to come. It is a pledge of our salvation.
- c) The Holy Spirit guides and enables us to live as God would have us live for His glory.
- d) As part of c) above, the Holy Spirit leads us into the fullness of God. The Holy Spirit works to progressively mould and shape us into the image and character of Christ. Theologians call this ‘sanctification’. As part of this, the fruits of the spirit grow within us.
- e) As God decides in His grace, the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to people for God’s glory (i.e. building his kingdom). For more detailed information, please look at the notes that were prepared for the sermon series “The Call: You have been Gifted” (Sept 2010) on the church website:

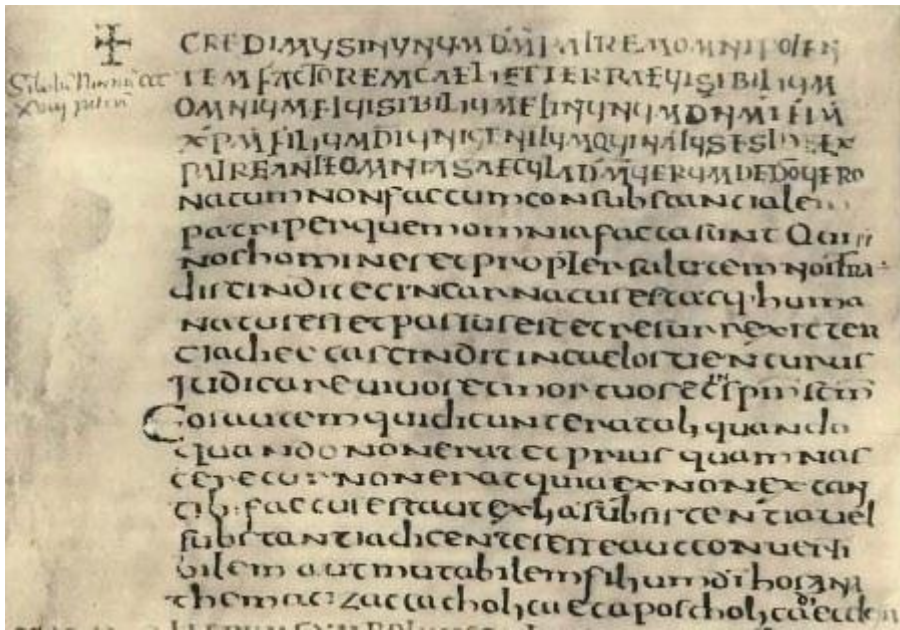
<http://www.stjohns-burscough.org/WhatsHappening/Resources/The%20Call.pdf>

These notes provide teaching on this passage about spiritual gifts.

3. The fruits of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22) are the qualities that are naturally expected to be seen in the lives of all Christians as faith grows. Just as apples are the fruit that is expected from an apple tree so the fruits of the Holy Spirit come as the seed of the gospel grows in us.

Spiritual gifts are given by God, as He wills, to Christians for His glory. They cannot be earned. They are not an award from God for 'good behaviour'. They are gifts. What's more, God grants spiritual gifts for a purpose (1 Corinthians 12:7) – for the common good of the kingdom of God. The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25: 1-30) makes this point very clearly. Moreover, spiritual gifts are to be used sensitively and increase through being used. Again, the Parable of the Talents makes this point.

I Believe: Exploring the Apostles' Creed



I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and buried. He descended to the dead.

On the third day He arose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

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(note: includes an edited transcript from a recent Café Church on "Heaven")



Sermon 7 October 21, 2012:

The Church

Readings: Acts 4: 32-37; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

“ I Believe in...the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins.....”

Background:

The Apostles' Creed now draws to a conclusion by considering our response to God as we await His return his glory. The content and the order of the credal statements are important.

To believe in Jesus Christ, is to believe in, and to belong to, a dynamic community which spans the centuries. The Greek word in the New Testament (*ekklesia*), which we translate as 'church' does not mean a building but a group of people. *Ekklesia* literally means 'those who are called out'. (Note: this is part of what 'holy' means). The church consists of those who have been called out of the world into a community of faith – those who God has “*called...out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

And the role of this community, built in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to continue the work of the ascended Jesus, building the Kingdom of God and being the kingdom of God on earth until Christ returns.

Ice-breaker:

Share together all that “the church” offers? Why do you think the church exists and why does it offer what it does?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

1. What do you understand by the description of the church as “*holy*” and “*catholic*”? How does/ought the church to demonstrate this description?
2. Do you think it is right for someone to say, “I believe in God but I don’t go to church?” Why might they say this and how would you respond?
3. **Read Acts 4:32-37.** Note verse 32. This is the key verse. Everything flows from this reality.

How powerful was this example at the time? How can we follow this example of love in action today? What prevents us today? How do you feel called to respond?

4. What do you understand a “*saint*” to be? What does the fact that we believe “*in the communion of saints*” mean to you?
5. **Read 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31.** What spiritual gifts do you discern in yourself and in others in your housegroup? How are you using them for Christ?
(note: For a fuller information, please look at the notes that were written to accompany the sermon “You have been gifted” in the series “The Call” from September 2010. See the church website <http://www.stjohnsburscough.org/WhatsHappening/Resources/The%20Call.pdf>)

6. What do you understand by the forgiveness of sins? How must this influence our daily living?

Helpful Hints:

1. “*Holy*” means set apart – set apart from the world, belonging to God. To do the work of God and also, to increasingly be like God in character and action. “*Holy*” It also means ‘pure’.

As Christians are new creations, in Christ, belonging to God’s kingdom not the kingdom of this (fallen) world, we are to be increasingly becoming like Christ for God’s glory. This is what the Holy Spirit works in us to achieve but we must cooperate.

“*Catholic*” means universal - for all people, of all times, everywhere. The church is composed of disciples of Christ from times past, in the present and in the future. With Christ as head (Colossians 1:18), the church is therefore one family composed of all who accept Christ as personal Lord and Saviour (Ephesians 4: 4-6). This is a powerful & important fact. The church is God’s new society on earth. The first fruits of the coming Kingdom of God.

What’s more, the use of the word ‘catholic’ in The Apostles’ Creed, is to affirm that the message of the church (i.e. the gospel) is valid and relevant to every age, every situation and to every person everywhere for all time.

2. Sadly, such a comment is increasingly common. In my experience, it arises from a misunderstanding of God, His purposes and the church and sadly, can be encouraged by a ‘unfortunate’ experience of church.

Briefly, to believe this is not biblical. God is relational (e.g. the Trinity) and desires his creation to live in relationship with Him and others. This is why Christ came. What’s more, the teaching of Jesus constantly makes this point e.g. the church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 2:13-22).

Cyrus of Carthage, a famous Christian martyr, once wrote: “No-one can have God as his father who does not have the church for a mother.”

To believe in the church is to recognize the need for support structures for faith (see John 17:14-18). To receive and give support and as we do, to grow into the image and likeness of Christ in him for his glory. To be one. This was Christ’s request in his final prayer on earth (John 17).

3. The bible teaches that a saint is anyone who has accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal Saviour.

Communion, in this context, means fellowship. Through faith in Jesus Christ, Christians are part of the family of God. Living in relationship with God and with all Christians

(past, present and future) who are our brothers and sisters. Reading Hebrews 11:1-12:3, we realize this. These saints from the past, who have successfully run the race, are now “a great cloud of witnesses” cheering us on as we run the race of discipleship today. The saints of the present day are also supporting us today and we support others in return.



Sermon 8 October 28th, 2012:

The Resurrection & The Life To Come

Readings: John 11: 17-27; Revelation 21:1-8

“I believe inthe resurrection and the life to come.”

Background:

Everyone lives in hope. Without hope, it is argued, life can become unbearable. The word hope, in it's fullest sense, means a 'sure and confident expectation.' The Christian hope is indeed confident and assured. To *“put our hope in the living God”* (1 Timothy 4:10) is to look to him in expectation, with confidence and trust, knowing and relying upon God's love and faithfulness. Because of Christ's death, resurrection ascension, the Christian hope is certain (e.g. 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 2 2:16). It is this hope that has inspired Christian living and endurance since time began (1 Peter 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Integral to the Christian hope, is that Christ will return to complete his salvation work and inaugurate the kingdom of God in all its' fullness. The Apostles' Creed concludes by stating this hope – this certainty. And as we have learnt in earlier studies, Christ's return will lead to the Last Judgement and then the conclusion of God's salvation plan. This is the establishment of the kingdom of God in its completeness, in glory and forever. All those who are “in Christ” will dwell with God forever in the fullness of His love and presence for evermore. Those who do not know Christ as Lord, will be banished from relationship with God forever. This is Hell.

Ice-breaker:

What do you hope for?

Why are you perhaps more hopeful for some things compared to others? Why might this be?

Study: see *Helpful Hints*

Read John 11:17-27

1. Read verses 25-27. What do you understand that Jesus means by His statement? What does this declaration reveal about Him and our response?

Read Revelation 21:1-8

2. What do you think everlasting life, life with God in heaven will be like?
3. To help us to try to grasp what life everlasting with God will be like when we will live with God in perfection, scripture uses several images to help us to grasp this. In our reading we'll consider one image - the New Jerusalem -that is described in the prophetic book, Revelation. This book is full of symbols that have meaning.

Reading the passage, how does it make you feel?

(Note: Before your session, you may like to read the accompanying edited transcript in *Helpful Hints* that I have reproduced from a recent café church when I spoke about heaven.)

4. You may have heard the phrase, “s/he is so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use!” I think that this quip reveals a profound truth.

As we wait Christ’s return, Christians are to continue the work of God, building His coming kingdom, today and tomorrow. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God is growing in and through us. We are being transformed into the image and character of Christ, doing the will of God the Father. Theologians call this “sanctification.”

As we conclude our study of The Apostles’ Creed together, how has your faith been challenged and developed? How do you see God’s work of sanctification taking place in you and through you?

(P.S. We are all work in progress until God’s work in us is completed when we are with Christ in “*the life everlasting*”.)

Helpful Hints:

3. Extract from Café Church on Heaven given by Richard last year.

Read Rev. 21: The imagery is powerful and challenges our preconceptions.

We think of going up to heaven. The passage speaks of the **New Jerusalem** coming down to humanity – an extension of the incarnation.

Jerusalem was/is the holy city & the capital of Israel.

- q) What motifs & ideas does this image convey?

Rev. 22:2 Presence of “*the tree of life*”. This takes us back to creation (see Genesis). Heaven is the restoration of the bliss of Eden when God dwelt with humanity in harmony. In John’s vision, the pain, sorrow and evil of a fallen world have finally passed away and creation is restored to God’s intention.

Note that the heavenly metropolis exceeds any earthly comfort or security that the Christians in Asia Minor (who were few in number and generally of a low social status) had known.

It is described as a “*walled city*” – a place of safety and security. Note the 12 gates are permanently open to welcome people.

Most significant, is that the New Jerusalem does not contain a temple (21:22). There is now no need for a temple. Been made redundant as God now dwells with his people. Every believer is a priest.

Restoration of Eden (Rev. 21:1-3)

Invites us to think of heaven as the renewed paradise. A central element of the restored paradise is *"the river of the water of life"* which flows from the throne of God (Rev. 21:1-2). On either side of the river is the *"tree of life"*, the leaves of which are *"for the healing of the nations"*.

What makes heaven heaven is not the scenery, the weather, the interior decoration but the people. What makes heaven heaven is who will be there and the nature of the relationships with God.

a) Revelation 21:4 **We will be thoroughly joyful.** Romans 8:18

b) Rev 22:5 **We will be very productive**

Look at 22:5 at the end of the verse. There is just one phrase I want to unpack. *"And they will reign for ever and ever"* — that's the people of God, you and me.

What does this verse mean?

As a child, I used to picture heaven as sitting on a cloud strumming a harp, waiting for something to happen. This is not what Rev 22:5 means.

This is God redeeming that for which we were made in the first place. I won't take the time to look it up right now, but much of this goes right back to the beginning, back to Genesis. In the garden, God said that we were created in his image, and we were made to have what? To have dominion over the created order. That is to reign in co-operation with him over his creation. We were made to work and to be fruitful. We were designed to be co-regents with God.

This is what this is all about. Every one of us has this need to grow and learn, to contribute and produce. And friends, I don't think that this need is going to be frustrated in heaven. I believe that our gifts and abilities will finally be fully actualized in heaven.

You will be involved in heaven — in the beautiful words of one writer — in ceaseless, creative activity with Jesus and his friends. Jesus will say, "Richard, what do you think we ought to do?" And you will answer with creative, unique genius, wisdom and insight. "Well, of course, I'm not omniscient, but I think . . ." and you'll say whatever you think. And Jesus will say, "That's a great idea. Why don't you do that?" (Remember we will be perfect, living in perfection)

One of the great promises in Scripture comes in Matthew 25 - the parable of the talents. You may have never thought about this. Jesus says the day is coming, not in this world, in the next. The day is coming when he returns, and the Father will say to us — to his servants — "You have been faithful in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your Master."

This is after the return of the Master, and you will be given great responsibilities. Responsibilities that compared to whatever you're doing now are just a few things. Some of you have been wondering about heaven:

- will there be an intellectual challenge to wrap my mind around?
- Or will there be adventures that require greatness of spirit?
- Will there be tasks that need strength of will and character to be done?
- Will there be a place for creative, compelling, articulate communication?

I believe there will be. Dallas Willard puts it like this: "*You will know fullness of function; the unending creativity involved in a cosmos-wide, cooperative pursuit of a created order that continuously approaches, but never reaches, the limitless, goodness, and greatness of the triune personality of God.*"

That's what you're going to do.

So you will develop as much as God desires. You will hone your gifts. You will develop your skills. You will discover and unleash the abilities that God has given to you. I don't believe that heaven is a retirement village. I believe that the bible teaches that you will be thoroughly joyful and you will be amazingly productive in "*the life everlasting*".

c) Rev 21:23 **You will be morally flawless**

Revelation 21:23: "*And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.*" In 22:5, John uses the same imagery: "*There will be no more night. They need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light.*" There will be no darkness there, no living in darkness. We will not hide.

Your character will be perfected. "I'm making everything new," God says, "and that includes you." You will have a new heart. You will effortlessly love Jesus and all of his friends. You will have a new mind, and the only thoughts that will pass through will be those that are noble, good because they honour God,

You will have a new mouth. You will speak words of moral beauty and gracious truth. There will be no night in heaven, no darkness, nothing to hide. And you'll be fully known.

In Revelation 21:15-17 we read of a "measuring rod" — God is measuring the community. The idea is that God knows every millimeter of his community. And, of course, his community is his people. There will be no hiding from God and others in heaven. No deception. There will be total transparency. God will know everything there is to know about you, and about every single person in his community. **You will be fully known and God will delight in you.**

d) **You will be completely fulfilled**

Revelation 22:1, 2: "*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life*" — you'll remember that from Genesis — "*bearing 12 crops.*" This was John's favourite number symbolizing fullness, the wholeness of the people of God.

"... *bearing 12 crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*" There will be clear water and fruit. This is where we read about what we'll eat and drink in heaven — water and 12 varieties of fruit. And some of you maybe little disappointed because you were hoping for a really good Lancashire hotpot. But this is not the menu!

The idea here is you will be completely fulfilled. Imagine that — you will be completely fulfilled. In this world, we live under the curse. We desire, but our desires are frustrated. We dream, and our dreams go unfulfilled. We think if we could just have more we would be content. And we get more, but it's never enough. But the day is coming, when you will be completely satisfied.

Revelation 21:6 is the promise of God, "*To him who is thirsty*" — and what does that image mean? It's unfulfilled desire. "*To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.*"

The day is coming when the only desire you have will be for that which is good (which is of God and for God and our good) and every desire will be fulfilled — for intimacy, for significance, for community, for beauty, for love.

q) Will we know people in heaven?

God is relational. In heaven, I believe that we will know God fully & be known fully.

Will there be marriage in heaven? See Matthew 22:23-33 & Mark 12: 25

I don't believe that there will be marriage, as we understand it, in heaven. The theologian N.T. Wright believes that there will be no sex as there is no need to procreate. **But**, I do think that we will know our loved ones in heaven if they had accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour whilst living on earth.

q) Will we have bodies in heaven?

I believe that Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 & 1 Corinthians 15: 35-49 that we will. In heaven, we won't be "*naked*" (verse 3), a bare spirit or soul without any "clothing". (2 Cor. verse 4). I believe that we will be clothed with our heavenly dwelling - new bodies.

The present version of the human body (1 Cor. 15: 47-49) is "earthly", belongs to the present age and will return to it. The new body, which in 1 Cor. 15: 44,46 Paul refers to as "*animated by the spirit*" is waiting in heaven, in God's space and sphere, and is of a kind that will never where out.

Origen believed that our unique identity will be known in our heavenly body. Augustine was critical of this though. Professor Rev. Alister McGrath writes that discussion about bodies in heaven is speculation.

q) How do we get to Heaven?

The bible teaches that Jesus invites all to the "banquet" (Matthew 22:1-14) but only those who have accepted him as Lord and Saviour will be allowed in i.e. receive new life. See John 14:6.

q) When will Heaven come about?

Heaven has always existed, as it is where God dwells.

Heaven is both the future home of the believer (2 Cor. 5:1-2; Phil. 3:20) and also the present dwelling place of Jesus Christ from where he will come in final judgement (Romans 10:6; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16) at a time and date that God the Father decides. After judgement, when God completes his work of salvation, when everything is made new, Christians will abide with God in the life everlasting.
