

At the end of this sermon, we will recite the words of the Nicene Creed. The creed is enjoying a higher profile this year as we celebrate the seventeenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea in 325, though the version that we use is the expanded one that was agreed later in the fourth century. The first two words of the creed are significant for this morning's reading. 'We believe'. Unlike the Apostles' Creed which begins 'I believe' the Nicene Creed begins with the plural. This is an act of corporate confession. Together as a church we confess the faith.

Both Abraham and Jesus are pioneers of faith. And each represents a new people that God is creating around them. Though childless in their old age, Abraham and Sarah are promised descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. At the outset of his Galilean ministry, Jesus gathers twelve disciples and other followers. They are part of a small movement within Israel, the seeds of what became the church, comprising both Jews and Gentiles. Paul goes on to speak of our having a citizenship in heaven.

We might say that believing and belonging go together. The faith is confessed within and by a community which adds to its numbers. Christianity spreads not one by one but through the creation of congregations, where people come together in patterns of worship, support and service. There is a sense, I think, in which faith outside the church is a contradiction in terms. Christianity is at least as much a social movement as it is a set of beliefs.

The loss of a sense of community is much lamented these days. Our lives have become too atomised and disconnected, as we spend time in front of screens sequestered in our own homes. Formal adherence to political parties, trade unions, and churches has been in decline for about two generations. The membership figures are much lower than they were fifty years ago. Finding people to run things and to stand for office seems harder than it once was. And yet we are social animals and need human interaction and a sense of belonging to flourish.

Some years ago, I was involved in the work of the Edinburgh College of Art. During that time, I had the privilege of learning about the experimental work that featured in the annual degree shows. This was a steep learning curve for me. We even purchased an abstract painting which hangs in our flat here in Cambridge and elicits a range of comments.

One student attracted much press publicity after producing a display comprising a set of door mats. He lived in a tenement flat and was disappointed that there was so little interaction amongst his neighbours. They lived beside each other, often for years, but hardly ever came into contact. Though living in close proximity, they were strangers to one another. So, as he devised his artistic installation, he had the idea that he would steal the doormats of all his neighbours to provide the raw material for his creation.

Once he had assembled the work, he then posted a letter to each flat saying that he had taken their doormats as a way of drawing attention to the lack of community in their midst. But if they would like to attend the exhibition, he added, they would be offered a glass of wine and an opportunity to meet and converse with one another. At the close of the evening, the display would be dismantled at which point they could return home with their missing door mats. The installation was entitled 'Love thy neighbour', so it had a Biblical theme.

As you can imagine, this artistic experiment aroused a variety of reactions. Was he a thief or an inspired visionary? Did his artwork transform his neighbourhood or simply irritate everybody? Was this a prophetic gesture that drew attention to the needs of his community or merely a clever prank? And will you now go home and check whether your doormat is still there?

Not surprisingly, the police were called at one point to investigate the disappearing doormats. A total of 210 were taken in order to create the installation – that must have meant a lot of people needing to be placated with large quantities of wine. A police spokesperson was quoted in the Evening News – 'The gentleman in question was asked to return the mats and the matter is now resolved with no further police action to be taken' - the PR department not giving too much away there. But whatever the reaction at that time, it didn't harm the artist's career (Kevin Harman) which has continued to flourish.

Community is well and good, but life together is neither a simple nor a smooth process. In the cycle of stories about Abraham, he is often embattled, on the move, and faced with disruption in his own family. This too is the story of Isaac and Jacob. Their children are at odds with each other and the harmony of the group is frequently disturbed. And, as he travels to Jerusalem for the final time, Jesus weeps over the city.

Jesus places himself in a long tradition of failure. The prophets were not heeded, nor is he. It's easy to overlook how badly his intended mission ends in Jerusalem, at least in human terms. The NT struggles to understand this – why was God's Messiah rejected in this way. The philosopher Nietzsche once said that there was only one true Christian who ever lived and they crucified him. His people turn against him. So much of Scripture is more about human failure than success.

This pattern is repeated in the church. The followers of Jesus will eventually regroup and continue, but they will often disappoint. The letters of Paul reveal divisions that threaten the unity and peace of the church. The church too is a mixed community of saints and sinners, of people the quality of whose lives is variable. There are tares amidst the wheat, goats amongst the sheep. Luther spoke of mouse droppings in the peppercorns which I suppose must have a problem in his time.

These tensions may actually run through each one of us. We internalise them. Our faith can waver. Commitment can be half-hearted. We have to make regular confession of our sins. In Lent, we try to do better in some small way. The forgiveness of sin is not once for all, but over and over again.

And yet we are given the grace of God. And the church is where the Holy Spirit is always active, especially in the simple bonds of friendship. Here we can be strengthened by that affirmation 'we believe'. In times of difficulty, we are supported by the prayers of others. When we find it hard to believe, we can draw strength from the confession of those beside us. If our voices fail, then others will sing for us. When we are cast down, we can lean upon the care of those who surround us.

This week I took part in an event in the Diocese of Birmingham. I learned of the recent baptism and confirmation of a group of Iranian people who had come through hard times. I was told that they testified not so much to a sudden shift of belief as to the friendship and care they had received within the walls of the church. Instead of fear, they had found love. It is love that kindles faith. As Christ weeps over Jerusalem, he likens himself to a mother bird. His tears are a sign of the love of God still present in our communities of faith. Thanks be to God.