

The Communion of Saints (1 John 1)

1 John 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

Existential Urgency – Communion of Saints means fellowship with those you don't agree with, dislike or object to. That's God's challenge - it's not enough to be in fellowship with Him. In fact, we don't have any choice.....v. 7

Who is your favourite saint? Put in the chat.....

That's right – you guys have been paying attention whilst Daniel has been preaching. We are all saints – those who follow Jesus as Lord. We are being made holy by Jesus and filled with the HS and therefore we are all saints. Our friends, family and heroes are saints. Those who encourage us are saints. We often think of the word as meaning those who have the special status of Saint – St Augustine or St Michael or St Mary, mother of Jesus. But actually we know that all of us have that status.

We will come back to that word and that list in a little while.

And what does communion of saints mean? We rattle it off at the end of the Apostle's creed.....in some ways it could just be seen as a repetition of the line before – we believe in the holy, catholic church. After all, in many ways it means the same. As Daniel said (again) the holy catholic church means that we have brothers

and sisters (fellow saints) all over the world. Does communion of saints not mean that too?

Yes, it does. But maybe looking from a different angle – like moving to a different place in the cosmos to look at the community of believers.

So let's look at the words themselves first.

The word 'communion' in the Apostles creed comes from the Greek *koinonia* which is translated here as fellowship. We see it repeated several times as John underlines the impact of commitment to God and to each other.

The word means partnership, fellowship, relationship, togetherness. Long before NT times, it was used by Greek writers to describe any partnership, any fellowship, any activity, any experience or relationship in which people come together. In Roman society it was used for legally binding arrangements. It was even used by Aristotle to describe marriage. In the NT it is often used to describe the coming together for a common purpose.

However, it is richer than the idea of a legal arrangement. It is also used for describing a personal relationship without any common tasks associated. It can mean sharing with others who are in need and it also is used in 1Cor in relationship to the Eucharist.

In our reading today, it is used in two slightly different senses – in verse 3, it links to the common task of spreading the word about Jesus. In verses 6 and 7 it relates to relationship pure and simple.

What about the word 'saints'?

The Greek word translated "saints," is *hagioi*.

This comes from the Greek word for "holy." It is related to the word "sanctified."

We often hear it in the context of someone who has become very holy – or in the context of someone who is going beyond the call of duty in helping others (he's such a saint). We don't normally consider ourselves in that league.

However, it is much more general than that – used in the NT for the followers of the way. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul notes that every sinner who is saved by God's grace is a saint, is being sanctified. That person is in the process of being transformed by the Holy Spirit of God. None of us have fully arrived, but we are clothed in Christ's righteousness, being sanctified. We are followers of the way, on the way.

And when we talk about saints in the creed, we aren't only talking about those saints we see around us today, but all those who have gone before us. In Hebrews, we hear about the great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12). The great mass of saints. A great body of worshippers of God looking to Jesus as their saviour.

And the 'communion of the saints'?

This is a grouping across time and space. So as I have said, not only those alive today but also those who have gone before. Not only those who are close to us here in NL but those all over the globe.

We are in communion with each other due to our communion with God. That's why we are not just a club of like-minded individuals. We are not a joint group doing good. The church can become just another community organisation if the fellowship is not based on Jesus Christ. We are in fellowship as saints, men and women individually and corporately committed to Jesus Christ as our Saviour and our Lord.

And what does the bible in today's reading have to say?

Look at verse 3: This is the sense of being in communion with a purpose together – to proclaim the good news.

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

But John goes on to use the relationship sense of fellowship in verses 6 and 7.

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with **one another**,

This is a connectedness that has nothing to do with a joint project or objective comes from who we are.

But.....have a read again. This is weird!! I would expect him to say 'if we walk in the light, we have fellowship with God'. But no.....if we walk in the light we have fellowship with each other.....so it is an inevitable part of our faith that following Jesus leads to fellowship with one another. We can't be joined to Jesus and ignore everyone else.....it is part of the deal. Nothing to do with us – it is inevitable and as a consequence of Christ in us and us walking in the light.

Walking – on the way. I think the theme of walking is important here. Just as a saint (in the widest sense) doesn't mean we are already fully sanctified but we are on the

way, we see here that we are in fellowship as we walk in the light. We have not arrived but we are on a journey of discipleship.

So it is very similar to the previous line in the creed 'I believe in the holy catholic church'. The Gospel is universal and we are connected together as church – as the body of Christ.

So together – like a great wonderful crowd walking in the way. Helping each other, picking up if we fall, encouraging, pointing the way.

That all sounds warm and comforting doesn't it? We are joined in fellowship to all of those wonderful people who have gone before us and all of our friends here and over the world. If we look at the list in the chat, we have a great group of people to look up to and enjoy being in fellowship with.

But.....the fellowship we talk about here has a very deep and challenging side: what about those we don't agree with. There have been religious wars and conflicts through the centuries between different denominations. There are still churches where we are not able to participate in the Eucharist or where we don't feel at home. But we all speak this line out in the Apostles Creed. Does this mean that we have little different tribes of saints who I am in communion with and they have other ones? I don't think so. If so, this challenges us to reach out ecumenically to all Christian denominations and churches to welcome them as brothers and sisters in fellowship.

From another angle, what about those on the way, who are walking in the light that we don't like, those who hold views we find offensive. What about those who we think shouldn't be seen as saints at all. Who claim Jesus as their lord but continue to do things we think are wrong.

Some disagreements might feel ok – I like tea and you like coffee. Some go a bit deeper – views on politics or social justice. What about those different denominations we don't belong to? And theological views on ministry, sexuality or wealth? And there will be some people who claim allegiance to Christ that we think are just plain wrong/wicked – what about the prosperity gospel preachers?

That wider list of saints might contain (will contain) lots of people that we don't want to see there. It is not as comfortable as we might think. Particularly if we look at those who have gone before. Some we might be happy about – Mary, mother of Jesus or St Francis are really inspiring. But there might be some that we now see got things wrong. All those whose statues are being toppled or removed as we re-

evaluate historical movements and actions. Are those historical 'saints' also in communion with us?

I would invite you to spend a moment thinking about who else you could and should put on that list that you find difficult. The kind of person you don't want to think about fellowship with.

And then consider that the Apostles Creed isn't always as easy to live as we think.

I believe in the communion of saints is a challenging declaration. It means: I disagree with you but...we are also joined and connected by our fellowship with Jesus. Whether we like it or not. And it happens as we invite the HS into our hearts to join us together. The third person of the trinity is able to transform us into saints and bring us into fellowship. I don't think that means we have to accept everything that another saint says. It doesn't mean we have to accept everything that another saint does. But it does mean that we have to show respect and love as we challenge each other and understand that we are connected more deeply than we might want to be!

John has a lot more to say in his letter about what living as followers of Jesus looks like. I invite you to spend half an hour with your bibles this afternoon and read the whole letter to get a feel for what fellowship leads to. This contains some of the most beautiful descriptions of God's love for us and his commands to love each other. Whether we feel like it or not, whether we think we can or not. We are being made holy as we walk in the light and with God's grace, we can not only be in fellowship but show it too.

Other than that, there isn't a specific action to take away from this short talk. There isn't homework to try and make yourself more holy (and saint like) before next Sunday. But there is a plea – to understand that we are all **on the way** in different stages. That we don't know where someone else is in that journey. that we can't dismiss someone else as wrong and think that is the end of it. The connection as fellowship is actually much deeper than that. It means that as we encounter others that we don't like, we cannot just ignore them or walk away. As John writes later in his letter 'we love because he first loved us'. If we are accepted and forgiven, we have to do the same.

Although I find it hard to swallow, with the help of the HS, I will still declare:

'I believe in the communion of saints'.