

The Church and the forgiveness of sins

Jesus tells two stories about the immense value of becoming a disciple, and how people realise this. The Kingdom of heaven, he says, is like treasure, hidden in a field, which someone found and hid, and then in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Or, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. On finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.

Sometimes people think those two stories are about sacrifice. We read them and put the emphasis on each person going and selling all that they have. But actually they're about value. Both traders are richer by far at the end of the story. That's the point.

Some look for the pearl for the whole of their lives, trying to discover what is really important and precious and valuable. And some stumble across what is truly important, almost by accident.

Well the pandemic has been a time for rediscovering what are the most important and valuable things in our whole lives, and especially our faith. So welcome to the last in this series of five films telling a great story of the Christian faith and the Apostles' Creed; powerful words spoken by Christians all over the world as we come together to baptism and as we gather Sunday by Sunday. I'm Steven, the Bishop of Oxford, and it's been great to have you with me on this journey.

One way of seeing the Creed is as a reminder of all that is valuable and precious in the Christian way. We say 'I believe in God the Father', and we reset our relationship with the whole of the universe. We are part of the creation made by God who loves us.

We say 'I believe in his son, Jesus Christ', and we remember that we are disciples called into friendship with Jesus. And called the pattern our lives on his life.

We say 'I believe in the Holy Spirit' and remind ourselves of the amazing truth that God sets within us, in our hearts, springs of living water, God's own breath of life in us, to renew us and give us strength and change us daily from within.

Already enough, I hope to make it clear that our faith is indeed a great treasure and a pearl of great price.

But then if these things are not enough, the final lines of the Creed remind us of the other blessings which are ours in Christ and in our Christian lives.

'I believe in the Holy catholic Church.'

I am part of the worldwide family of Christian people who serve and follow Jesus. We are never alone. God has given to us sisters and brothers, a worldwide family to share our lives and faith and service. Especially as part of our local church, part of being a Christian is to share our lives with others, an inestimable treasure.

'I believe in the communion of Saints.'

The church is not only on Earth, but in heaven. Those who have died in the faith and have gone before us. The great cloud of witnesses, now cheering us on, praying for us, connected to us. Great treasure.

'I believe in the forgiveness of sin.'

I know that I am and always will be imperfect. I mess things up. When we mess things up across the whole of our lives, that can be a very big mess indeed. Because of Jesus Christ and his death, I know and understand that these, my sins, are forgiven, washed away. I no longer have to carry them. There can be healing and a new creation.

Finally, 'I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.'

Jesus rose from the dead and the power of his resurrection means that I too can know resurrection and new life beyond death. Life in all its fullness and abundance in Christ, begins here on Earth. But because death has been defeated, this life is also life eternal and everlasting.

So here are all these benefits and blessings, here is all of this value, a new relationship with God as creator, redeemer and friend. Forgiveness of sins, eternal life. This is indeed treasure. This is the pearl of great price.

But do we have to go and sell everything we have to come and buy it? No, we don't. All of this is not for sale. It can't be earned. No amount of wealth or possessions would be enough in any case. All of this priceless treasure is offered to us by God, free of charge. This is amazing grace.

No matter what we've done, no matter how messed up our lives, no matter how far away from God we feel, no matter what our background.

And here is the final mystery. There are no half measures in faith. To receive and enjoy all of these benefits, all of this inestimable value, we come to Christ just as we are, to be washed and cleansed and made new on the inside and on the outside. We go down into the waters of baptism, we identify with Christ's death and our old life, our old self, dies. There are no half measures.

And we rise up again in a new creation to live our lives for God as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are given new clothes to wear on the inside and on the outside, the clothes of love, and we're given the seal of the Holy Spirit, who brings into our lives the joy of eternal life. So come and take hold of this new and eternal life with God.

How do we do that? At the end of this final film in our series, you'll find a link to another short film which is a series of prayers you can pray. You can pray these prayers if you're coming to Christian faith for the first time. You can pray them if you're returning to faith after many years. You may want to pray these prayers with those who've been journeying with you through Come and See, I hope you will.

Thank you so much for making this journey. May God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit lead you into all the fullness of life that God has for you and keep you and your families safe. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you now and always.

Amen.