

## Week 4

# One Holy Catholic & Apostolic Church

*The Vision of Bishop George Bell*

**We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church**

*Begin the session with a period of **quiet reflection and/or prayer.***

### A Bible Reading

**Romans 12; Ephesians 2. 8-22**

### Reflection by The Venerable Lyle Dennen

*Formerly Archdeacon of Hackney*



An audio version of this reflection is available in the Lent 2025 section of the Diocesan Website:

A distinguished British visitor to Moscow during the Second World War went to a local Russian church with a friend. At one point in the Liturgy, the congregation was powerfully singing what sounded to the Englishman like "Waves crashing onto the Rocks." He asked his friend "What are they singing?" The reply was "Oh, the Nicene Creed." Waves crashing on the Rocks: our beautiful Creed which summarises our faith of believing in God the Father, believing in Jesus Christ and believing in the Holy Spirit.

In the early texts of the Creed in Greek and Latin and in the accurate translation of it in the Book of Common Prayer, there is a subtle shift: the other following articles of faith, are no longer prefaced "I/We believe IN ...", but simply "I believe... One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." Belief, in the strict sense of the word, is owed only to God, The Holy Trinity. It is to God alone that we can give ourselves with our whole heart, mind, and will. Just for a moment repeat over and over the phrase from the Creed "God of God, Light of Light... God of God, Light of Light ..." If you repeat it quietly and devoutly, probably after a while you will feel a gentle warmth and the sense of the peace and light of Jesus Christ coming to you. You may already know well this experience from going to church, reading Scripture, praying with your fellow Christians, showing compassion and care to others, and most profoundly by receiving Holy Communion.

The presence of Christ in the Church, after all, is His presence in you, for you are the church. The Church should be the society of love. But because it is composed of us repenting sinners, with all the will in the world we still from time to time fail and fall. But the God we believe in never fails us in his love. The dying words of a German poet: "God will forgive me, after all that is his job." God will forgive us, after all that is his style, his work.

These four great words that define the church, One Holy Catholic and Apostolic, are often called the marks of the Church. But if we look at them with the eyes of Bishop George Bell, his remarkable life, his profound teaching and spirituality, his sacrificial care for others, his heroic witness on the world stage, his genial hospitality and kindness, then these words become dimensions that deepen our Christian lives.

Bishop Bell was born during the late great days of the Victorian period in a vicarage not far from where one could see the spire of Chichester Cathedral. He was a shy and diffident boy, but a distinguished student at Westminster School and then Christ Church Oxford. Preparing for ordination, he found two passions which he would hold throughout his life.

The first was a deep commitment to the ecumenical movement which was central to his understanding of the essential importance of the unity of the Church - it being One Church. Christian unity for him was not a melted down fusion of minimal traits from the worship, theology and values of different churches into a bland, tasteless ecclesiastical stew, but rather the discovery of vibrant common ground. This common ground was to be an area for friendship, learning, discussion and above all, for a common focus on caring action in society and the world. Bishop George Bell was committed to the vision of Christendom that stood for decency, justice, faith, righteousness, goodness and the rights of humanity. This for him was the mark, the dimension for the One Church.

His second passion in these days just before and during the First World War was for the poor, the persecuted and excluded. Bell believed the great call to social justice by the Church to be the central feature of the apostolic dimension of the Church: practical compassion and concern for the vulnerable were at the centre of the apostolic ministry of evangelism. It is by the grace of the Holy Spirit, that other people are most profoundly brought to a faith commitment in Jesus Christ, judged by who we are and how we act, rather than just by what we say.

For Bell, it was our Lord's life, his teaching, his healing actions, and of course his death and resurrection that were the grounding for the Church's apostolic dimension of our being sent out. Bell's deep concern for those in need was dramatically shown in his care and concern for refugees, the persecuted and the victims of the Holocaust by the Nazi regime in Germany. Bell's vision of Christendom was opposed to everything done by Hitler and Nazism. He saw the Second World War as a necessary, cosmic fight between good and evil. The battle was spiritual.

In 1914, George Bell had begun a new ministry as chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson. In this work he was at the centre of the Church of England's remarkable support for the nation in this terrible time of death, war, and suffering. In the last months of the First War, he heard about the death of one of his brothers and then, a week later, about the death of his other brother, just as the war was ending. All his life Bell was committed to peace and the reconciliation of nations. His understanding of the Catholic dimension of the Church was based on his vision of universal Christianity. The Church stands for wholeness, the Church breaks down the barriers that separate people - within a community, a nation, and between nations.

Before the rise of the Nazis, George Bell, through his ecumenical work, made many friendships with leading German theologians, most famously with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So, when the darkness of the Hitler era came in 1933, he knew and supported many in the Confessing German Church who opposed the Nazis. Bishop Bell during the war also had many contacts within the German resistance. He knew that there were these "other Germans", these good Germans. He struggled to break down the barriers that described all Germans as Nazis.

It was Bell's loyalty to the Catholic dimension of the Church, this universal aspect of the Church, which enabled him to see that wherever there is goodness and decency, one must support it. During the war, George Bell gave an odd but powerful analysis: "The Germans were the first victims of the Nazis". It is in this context that a Catholic dimension of the Church speaks to the universal wholeness of Christ's redemption of humanity. It is upon this Christian principle that George Bell carried out the most heroic and least popular act of his life.

At the time when British cities were being ruthlessly bombed, Europe ravaged by German atrocities, and millions dying in the Holocaust, Bishop Bell stood up in the House of Lords and denounced our saturation bombing of German cities. Was it not that over 100,000 people died during just one night in Dresden, a city that had no military significance?

Before becoming Bishop of Chichester, George Bell had become the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral. Much of his work there centered on the fourth attribute of the Church in the Creed, the dimension of the Church as holy. Because Bell loved the spirituality of the Book of Common Prayer, for him the “beauty of holiness” was central. He encouraged this “beauty of holiness” through making the services and worship beautiful and prayerful, through creating spaces in the cathedral for quiet reflection and opening the cathedral to encourage people to come in.

A significant factor in why today Canterbury is such a great centre for pilgrimage derives from the spiritual, foundational work of George Bell. It was thanks to Bell that art and drama were brought back into churches. He was an inspiration and patron to outstanding writers, artists, musicians, and playwrights. It was thanks to Bell’s teaching and encouragement that T. S. Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral*.

For Bishop George Bell the “beauty of holiness” was spiritually critical. Of course, the Church is holy, but we members of it are capable of being saints or sinners - and usually both. George Bell in his strength and humility knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was beautiful and brought beauty out of people, however lost, wounded, or sinful we might be. The Gospel was beautiful so that we might be holy.

Some people have written that George Bell was blocked from becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury because of his brave, heroic speech during the Second World War against saturation bombing of German cities in which hundreds of thousands of civilians died. I am not sure that I can agree that this is why he was blocked. I think that he did not become Archbishop because God in Christ had called him to Chichester. During the war, countless people suffering appallingly under the Nazis, if they could send a message to Britain, would begin by saying “Tell the Bishop of Chichester ...”, because they knew he would deeply care and would work relentlessly to help them.

I believe that George Bell found in the Diocese of Chichester that society of love, the Body of Christ, which allowed and inspired him to share his deep vision of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church. I think that the people of the Diocese of Chichester loved him because they knew that he loved them. In his enthronement sermon, George Bell had told the people of the Diocese that he wished to be a true father in God to them: one who is gentle and listens. A spiritual writer (Evelyn Underhill) has described the Creed as the ‘School of Charity’: in that school, George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, is a great teacher.

## Podcast

A short podcast of Bishop Martin in conversation with others will be available on the Diocesan Website from Ash Wednesday.

This may help your individual reflection or group discussion on this theme.

It will be available on the Diocesan Website a week before Ash Wednesday.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

- In the light of what you have read today, what have you learned about the life of Bishop George Bell and his legacy to us today?
- Discuss how these words (often called the marks of the Church) describe or define the church - One Holy Catholic and Apostolic?
- What does the phrase “beauty of holiness” mean to you? Perhaps look at the hymn *O Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness* too?
- When you consider current and recent world conflicts, how do you reconcile your Christian faith to the brutality and violence which is so often in evidence?

A Time of Prayer can follow.

## Some Hymn Suggestions

All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name

God is working his purpose out

In Christ there is no east or west