

Proclaiming our Belief

THIS short article is not concerned with the historical or theological reasons for the saying of the Apostles' Creed in Reformed Worship. It is simply an attempt to tell the story of what the regular repetition of the Creed and instruction thereon have come to mean, throughout the years, to the communicants of one Scots parish church. This story is in itself significant, and readers will draw their own conclusions, particularly at a time when ignorance of the Faith is confessedly general, not only amongst those outside the Church, but also amongst her membership. The story is largely factual.

The parish of Trinity, Coatdyke, was founded in 1905 by the late Rev. James Cromarty Smith, D.D. From the beginning of his ministry there, Dr Cromarty Smith insisted upon a full Catholic and Reformed approach to his church's life and worship. The aspect of this which concerns us was the proclamation of the Belief, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, at all full services, whether on Sunday or week-days, by young and old alike. The Creed was also his basis of instruction on the Christian Faith to Sunday School Children, Catechumens preparing for Confirmation and First Communion and to the people in the Sunday sermons; this latter in terms of the Christian Year which secured the teaching of the whole of Christian doctrine at least once every twelve months. Dr Cromarty Smith retired after thirty-four years' service and I was privileged to serve a further six in the tradition which he so firmly established.

During the last year of my ministry some thirty communicants were selected, representing, so far as could be judged, an exact cross-section of the membership. They were chosen from Kirk Session, Congregational Board, Woman's Guild, Sunday School teachers, Youth leaders and ordinary communicants, both male and female. They were practically all from the same social class, the working class, as the congregation is drawn almost entirely from its ranks. Each person was asked to write down in his or her own words an answer to the statement: "Why I am glad we say the Creed." Their answers revealed a

depth of Christian understanding and belief which I, as their minister, had greatly underestimated, and which indeed astonished me. The answers were naturally highly individual and personal, yet all of them contained some common elements of belief.

The first common element was that the saying of the Creed constantly and inescapably brought the *fact* of God before them. Set in the midst of the common worship was this statement of Faith which lifted up their hearts from the temporal to the eternal. Many confessed that the whole Act of Worship took on a new significance at that point, and that they felt more in touch with spiritual reality throughout the rest of the service. They had reminded themselves of what they believed and consequently their thoughts, their worship fell into a right perspective.

The second common element was this: they felt individually united with those with whom they proclaimed their Faith—"I believe, yes," said an elder, "But also *we* believe." This experience went much further than the actual visible congregation. They indicated a oneness with all Christians of every clime and communion, even with the German Christians (the year was 1944). The oneness was supra-temporal as well—they were united with the Church visible and invisible; they glimpsed the significance of "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church; the Communion of saints . . ."

The third common element was the receipt of a personal strength for living. They remembered, in their proclamation, that God *is* Father, God *is* Almighty, God *is* Creator. Just as they knew the God they worshipped, so they knew of His power and providence in the lives they lived. They felt safe within the care of the kind of God they professed.

These, then, were the common elements of belief which impressed me greatly as showing just what ordinary people had come to believe and live in terms of the "Faith in miniature," as a Youth Leader called the Creed.

But they also said several other things which have more to do with the *manner* of their confession than with the actual form of words. This requires some explanation. They had been instructed from the beginning always to "speak out" the Creed, never to mumble it. To speak it out with head erect, looking the world, if you like, in the face. Men may believe what they like in this world, but this is what *we believe* and we are not ashamed of it! Their manner of recitation was a true proclamation. When,

in Morning Worship, for example, the New Testament Lesson is read, as a response to it the congregation rise in their places, without any bidding from the minister, and together state their Belief in a firm, unhurried way. Thus the Response to the Gospel becomes a confident assertion, entirely without self-consciousness, a united Act of Witness. Accordingly, the physical movement and positioning, and the vocal emphasis combined with their actual knowledge and experience of the Creed to persuade them that here they had the Faith which could conquer all things, and significantly enough, which they felt bound to defend in the outside world where the materialist and the agnostic believed otherwise, if they believed at all.

A minor but important point (which is often turned against the practice of saying the Creed) was that they were quite certain that the constant *repetition* of the Creed neither led them into formalism nor a mere formality. This was because they felt that the manner of proclamation was in itself a sufficient safe-guard against any decline in reality.

Another fairly common reaction was that a number felt a conviction of failure, and of unworthiness. "I believe these things; they are true; but I have not lived as if they were true." A close approximation, in other words, to the Catholic practice of self-examination in the light of the Articles of Belief.

Many other revealing answers were given, but these reflected the individual's spiritual insight and religious experience and I therefore do not intend to quote them. I have confined myself to fairly universal reactions.

It will be obvious from all the above, that many Scots men and women were strengthened and guided in their Christian Faith and practice in a rather astonishing way. But it should also be borne in mind that the actual proclamation of Belief, in public worship, was continuously reinforced by instruction at every level of Church life. The Sunday School children both said the Creed and were constantly reminded of what was meant by these things. The young people received their catechumens' instruction on the basis of the Creed, clause by clause. The acceptance of the Christian Year as the preaching theme for at least Morning Worship, as has been indicated, meant that all its articles were covered completely every twelve months. Instruction went hand-in-hand with Proclamation. This

union is necessary and indeed essential if the saying of the Creed is really to be meaningful.

Clergymen of different denominations—United Free and United Presbyterian, Methodists and Congregationalists, and indeed Anglicans during the war years—all these who have led this people's worship from time to time, have testified to the reality of the people's proclamation, one or two of them, on their own confession, somewhat against their personal feelings in the matter.

That, then, is the story briefly recorded here. For four years now it has been a large part of my life and work to assess, and try to deal with, ignorance of the Christian Faith and indifference to it, and to seek to gauge the spiritual temper of Scotland. This experience in Coatdyke, together with this later experience, have convinced me that if I were set down in an entirely pagan or near-pagan area to build a church, I should start on the fundamental basis of the Creed—the Apostles' Creed to begin with, thence onwards and more fully with the Nicene. And I would submit, on the basis of what I have reported, that this would be no ritualistic whim, but a solid foundation of a Faith for Living.

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