

ST. LUKE'S LENTEN SERIES 3/16/2017  
**COME TO THE WATER**  
**ESSENTIAL BELIEFS FOR A CHRISTIAN**  
**RICHARD SOMERSET-WARD**

"Come to the water", the preacher cries.

"Be baptized in Water and the Spirit".

"Be cleansed".

"Be born again".

"Come to the water to be claimed for Christ".

Perhaps there's another way of doing that – a more 21<sup>st</sup> century way?

Let's just skip the whole baptism business.

"Come to the Internet! Register online at the church of your choice."

"Leave us your credit card number so we don't have to write letters to you about all those silly little charges – stewardship and so on."

"..... and we'll look forward to seeing you next Christmas."

It's as simple, and easy, as that!

It's not exactly "coming to the water", is it? But what's it missing? After all, baptism is purely symbolic, isn't it? So what's the point? Why's it so essential?

I think I can tell you why. It's true, it is symbolic. We come to the water to be cleansed, physically and spiritually – to take our place in the waters that flow over, and unite, the whole community of Christian believers, throughout all ages and all places. That's the symbolism.

But we come to the water for another reason – and it's not symbolic at all. We come to the water because we believe something – something basic and crucial, something (in fact, the only thing) that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. We come to the water to declare that belief .... to our God, to our friends and neighbors, but most of all, I think, to ourselves

So what is that something we believe in? - something so basic and fundamental that it makes us Christians. It is our belief in the Incarnation. That is why we come to the water – to say (or if we are children, to have someone say on our behalf) that we believe that God – the Word, the Creator – became human, became flesh (“in carno”, in the flesh) and lived among us. “In the beginning was the Word ..... And the Word was made flesh and lived among us”.

That is the foundation, the cornerstone, of Christian belief. Absent that belief, I do not think we are Christians – we are not disciples of Jesus Christ. It is to state that belief that we come to the water in Holy Baptism, and later in Confirmation, and then, from time to time, to renew, or even to reaffirm, our baptismal vows. Do you believe that Jesus, the Son of God, was sent by his Father, the Creator, to live among us, to be human, to be both God and Man? Do you believe in the Incarnation?

There's more, of course, much more – but everything follows from that one essential beginning. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the rock on which we stand. And almost all the really important things that follow from it can be found in the Nicene Creed, which we recite together in church each Sunday.

Many people will tell you – and I suspect they are technically correct – that in order to be a Christian you must believe everything that is said in the Nicene Creed. That's why we recite it together, out loud, in church. And it's why it's incorporated into our baptismal vows, when we are promised to Christ ..... and into our confirmation vows, when we make that promise our own ..... and every time we reaffirm those vows thereafter.

But the Nicene Creed is an awful lot of belief, isn't it? What if we're not quite sure about some of the things in it – about the Virgin Birth, for instance, or the Holy Trinity? Does that mean we're not Christians?

I don't think so. In fact, let me be quite categoric: I do not think that, here and now, you have to subscribe 100% to every word of the Creed in order to declare yourself a Christian. There may be one sentence, one clause, that you question, that you can't quite believe – or maybe you don't quite understand it. Does that mean you're not a Christian? Of course it doesn't.

I can only speak from my own experience. As I've gone through life, as I've thought more fully about these clauses in the Creed, so I've come increasingly to understand them, and believe them. For years I believed passionately in the Incarnation ... but I couldn't, for the life of me, see why the Virgin Birth was so important. Now I've come to realize it's actually an essential element of the Incarnation – how could Jesus be both Man and God if he'd been conceived by purely human means? More and more, it all adds up!

\* \* \*

But before I go any further, I think I should try to define “belief”. What do I mean by it? If I were using it in any normal sense I'd be using empirical evidence (or what I conceive to be empirical evidence) to make me believe that something is true, that gives me what I consider factual certainty about something. I could tell you, for instance, that the chairs you are sitting on are made of plastic and metal. I could also tell you that I believe that one of those chairs will support me if I sit on it – that it won't collapse under my impressive weight (after all, I have empirical evidence for this – I've just sat on one of them to have dinner, and it didn't collapse). Now I could be right or wrong about these chairs, but it doesn't matter: it's what I believe, because of what I believe to be the empirical evidence available to me.

But this sort of belief doesn't work when it comes to religion, because with religion we are talking about mysteries. Worldly knowledge, intellect, experience .... they don't matter (or certainly, they're not the deciding factors). The

Incarnation itself is a mystery, so is the Resurrection, so is almost all Christian belief (and you can say the same thing about every other religion as well).

We must therefore rely on something else to believe in the things of religion, and that something is Faith. We are persuaded of something – something that is probably not factually provable, but we are sufficiently confident of it, sufficiently persuaded, to have faith in it. And it is our Faith that transforms it into Belief.

Christianity is about mysteries – mysteries so profound that they tell us about Life and Death, and the Life Beyond – everything there is to tell about our origins, our nature and our destiny – all the things that are mysteries to human beings.

\* \* \*

So what we're here to talk about are the Essentials of that belief. What *must* we believe in order to be Christians? – what are the bare essentials?

So yes, start with the Incarnation – you must believe that. And note what it says – that Jesus is both Man *and* God. We generally read about him (and probably think of him) as a man – that's the way we imagine him – but he's much more: he is God, he is the Deity, the godhead.

In the Scriptures, Jesus doesn't make a big fuss about his deity – he never says “I am God” – though St. John quotes him as saying “I and the Father are one” (*John 10:30*) – and at his baptism, you remember, the voice from heaven says “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” (*Matthew 3: 17*). John's gospel has no doubt about it: Jesus not only admits he is the Messiah, he broadcasts that fact, and he allows his disciples and followers to do so, too. But there's a difference between the gospels here: the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – agree with John that Jesus is the Messiah, but, for them, he's a secret Messiah. Their Jesus is always telling his disciples to keep this most important fact to themselves for the time being. Not John's Jesus – John's Jesus wants everyone to know, and to know now.

But none of that alters our first essential belief – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, “took flesh”, became human, and dwelled among us.

For what purpose? It wasn't just a conjuring trick – God showing off. No, Jesus came to earth for a purpose, and a crucial part of that purpose was to die and to rise from the dead. By his death on the cross he brought us salvation – he paid for all our sins, and (as the Prayer Book says) “made us heirs to eternal life”.

It's an awful story, Jesus' Passion, so much pain and grief – but it's also the Good News of Christianity – that our sins are forgiven us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. He is the Atonement – what the old Prayer Book called “the propitiation for our sins”. He is our Savior, our Salvation.

That, in itself, is hard to comprehend – maybe *impossible* to comprehend because it's so massive in scale, so vast in its meaning. But there's more. This salvation, we are told, is ours by Grace, *and* it's unconditional. It's not something we have to earn – we don't win it by brownie points or bonus marks or good grades. As St. Paul told the Ephesians, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God” (*Ephesians 2: 8-9*).

St. Paul, as always, has carefully chosen his words. Salvation may be unconditional, but there's only one way to it – through faith in Jesus Christ – “for by grace you have been saved *through faith*”.

So belief in the *purpose* of Jesus' death is also essential. But it's not just his death: it's his resurrection, too. “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain” – St. Paul to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians 15: 14*). If you believe in the purpose of Jesus' death (to atone for all of us and all our sinful lives), then it follows that Jesus himself rose from the dead, *and enables us to do so, too*. Belief in Jesus is, in fact, our passport to eternal life, and the only way we will get there.

So we have these three basic doctrines of Christianity – the absolute essentials, in my opinion – the Incarnation; Salvation through Grace (by Jesus' death on the cross); and the promise of Eternal Life (through the resurrection).

None of you will be surprised by these. But are there more? Yes, I think there are, and I want to single out two, in particular.

The first is the Gospel. There are people who would argue with this. I pointed out just now that the four gospels differ in their descriptions of how Jesus acknowledged his Messiahship – and I’m sure you can quote me lots of other similar examples of contradictions in the gospels.

But I don’t think that matters, and certainly, it doesn’t alter my belief that the gospels – and I would go further, the whole New Testament – is inspired directly by God. It is, I believe, the work of the Holy Spirit.

As to the differences and contradictions, I would say this: these books and letters may have been inspired by the Holy Spirit, but they are written by human beings, who are recording what they have seen or heard or come to believe. Like all human beings, they differ in their perceptions, but there is no doubt in my mind that, knowingly or unknowingly, they are carrying out God’s plan. How else could a religion like Christianity, from such obscure beginnings, have reached all the corners of the world? So yes, I believe that the Scripture is true, and divinely inspired.

The second addition I wish to make to the Essential Beliefs of Christianity is, you may think, a rather odd one – because it concerns the *nature* of human beings, and it’s something we know instinctively, and for which we do have empirical evidence. It is this: that we may be God’s people, his creation, but we are not his slaves. We are all endowed with Free Will. We don’t have to believe in God, or in anything else. We are sinful people, and our natural tendency is, alas, towards sin.

But this is precisely why acknowledging our Free Will is essential to being a Christian – because it means that the largest single element in our belief system (the only one that really counts) is the Faith I was talking about earlier. Faith is the only way to becoming a Christian .... and the only way to remain one.

Faith (as St. Paul so beautifully describes it) is like Hope and Love – intangible, hard to define, impossible to command – but essential to a Christian. It is the key – the only available key – to unlocking the mysteries of our religion. Only Faith will bring us the revelation and the belief that we seek.

\* \* \*

But what about the things I have not placed on my list of essentials? I haven't mentioned many of the things listed in the Creed, have I? What about the Virgin Birth? .... The Holy Trinity? .... The Communion of Saints? .... "the devil and all his works"? .... the blessed sacraments (the Eucharist and Holy Baptism)? .... and "the End Times", as they are called – what theologians call Eschatology – the second coming, the last judgment, and so on?

I'm sure this isn't the official doctrine of the Church, but what I would say about these various doctrines is exactly what I said earlier about the Virgin Birth. Once I had begun to understand the Incarnation, then the Virgin Birth made sense because it seemed to follow naturally. I'd say the same about the Trinity – I still pray principally to Jesus, because I feel I know him, but I am aware that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all manifestations of the One God. And again, that is an understanding that has followed from my acceptance of the Essential Beliefs. And I would say the same about almost everything else in the Creed.

Although, having said that, I might as well confess that I'm still a bit at sea over "the end times". I can't seem to get my mind around that one yet. When I admitted this to our old friend Hal Fales a year or two ago, when he was well into his nineties, he said "Don't be in a hurry, Richard – it'll come to haunt you soon enough"!

And what about the sacraments, you may ask? Are they essential to believe in? I think Professor Graham will talk more about this in two weeks' time. Suffice it for me to say that I think they are of the utmost importance to a Christian – they are the tools of our faith, what the catechism of the Anglican Communion calls "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace". Note the word "sign", not doctrine. In the Eucharist, the outward and visible sign is the bread and wine, while the inward and spiritual grace is the Body and Blood of Christ, Jesus' atonement for our sins. In the only other sacrament the Episcopal Church recognizes – Holy Baptism – the sign is the water, the inward and spiritual grace is reception into the body of Christ. Which of you would want to be without those things?

Speaking personally again, I would call these two sacraments essential to *my* life as a Christian, but they would mean nothing if I didn't already believe in the absolute essentials.

Because there is mystery and symbolism within these sacraments – they provide us with strength and comfort; they go deep into our souls. Are they essential to Christian belief? I don't think I'm able, or willing, to answer that question. My brain says they are signs and symbols, not absolutely essential: many people have been Christians without benefit of sacraments. But my heart says otherwise. Frankly, it's an emotional issue for me. Those two sacraments, and most especially the Eucharist, have been such a large part of my life that I cannot bear (I would not dare) to be without them.

Maybe that's just the view of a veteran sinner, but I suspect many of you will share it!

\* \* \*

So *for God's sake* (I can see you muttering) is he finished? Well, not quite. I was taught at confirmation – and I have always taught my own confirmation classes – that the Mandatum is an essential belief, even though it's not mentioned in the Creed.

The Mandatum is the commandment given by Jesus to his disciples – and to all of us – at the Last Supper – that we must love one another. *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

What we're talking about here is not so much a belief as a way of life, a *rule* of life. If we believe in the essential doctrines I have listed, and if we call ourselves Christians, then we have to believe in the Mandatum, and we have to dedicate our lives to following it – to *trying* to follow it. That is the least we can do as Christians who have come to the water, who have promised that we will follow the Way of Jesus Christ.



Remember, when we come to the water to reaffirm our baptismal vows with the Bishop at the Great Vigil, on the night before Easter, after we say that we believe in all those things listed in the Creed, we come to the five additional promises that are part of the Baptismal Covenant we are reaffirming or renewing –

- Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, *loving your neighbor as yourself*
- And will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

I 've often thought that if Jesus was asked to list the essential elements of Christianity – the things that make, or unmake, us as Christians – those are the things he would list. The doctrines I have spoken about are important because they are the absolute foundations of our belief – they are why we believe – but living the Gospel is most important of all, and it's summed up in the single verse that is the Mandatum (*John 13: 34*).

We should never forget that.