

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'

These studies were prepared during the COVID19 lockdown and restrictions of 2020. The choice of the Apostles Creed was a very deliberate attempt to remind one another of core Christian beliefs.

There is a tendency that when life becomes difficult and uncertainties rise then people retreat into simplistic ideas. This often divides the world into black and white choices of right and wrong. In difficult times it is not uncommon for churches, and many other groups beside, to raise the bar of belief so to make both entry to belong harder, but more importantly to make the cost of exit higher! They also engage in purges to rid themselves of impurities.

The aim of these Faith Conversations was rather to focus our attention on core aspects of Christian faith which might enable us to relocate some clarity as we gently navigate the nonsensical. They are described as a 'conversation' because a shared and respectful conversation about core realities is a very good way to avoid the interpretation of 'too few'. Sadly the dogma of an autocratic leader, or group, can easily distance both the Church and also the beautiful message of Jesus from the communities in which they live.

I pray that these studies might remind us of core christian beliefs in such a way that the Church settles again on its firm foundation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and especially the good news of Jesus as our incarnate and exalted Lord.

I pray that these studies might enable the Church to live their faith as confident contributors of the common good so that the whole of community is renewed and that conversation about Christian Belief, as found in the Apostles Creed, might once again be welcomed and embraced.

Michael Palmer
18 August 2020

The Content of the Conversations

1. Why is the Apostles Creed important for us now?
2. I believe in God, the Father almighty,
3. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
4. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
5. Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
6. Suffered under Pontius Pilate,
7. Was crucified, died, and was buried;
8. He descended to the dead.
9. On the third day he rose again;
10. He ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
11. And he will come to judge the living and the dead.
12. I believe in the Holy Spirit,
13. The holy catholic Church, the communion of saints,
14. The forgiveness of sins,
15. The resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Please note - the content of each of these conversations might flow into several conversations. Hence, do not feel under any rush to complete in 15 sittings. And remember - they are a conversation - I trust that they might be strengthened as you interact with them!

Also - These Faith Conversations encourage us into conversation with the following two Christian thinkers:

1. Helmut Thielicke - especially from his book 'I believe: The Christians's Creed.
and
2. Rowan Williams - especially from his book 'Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief'

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'

(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Conversation 1 -

Why is the Apostles Creed important for us now.

1. 'As our appreciation of the complexity of the world grows so does our longing for a 'simple handle' to make sense of things or 'a confident leader' to show us the way'.

Can you give examples which illustrate the truth of this statement?

What might be some dangers of this tendency for society?

What might be some dangers of this tendency for the Church?

What might be some dangers of this tendency for our Christian Faith?

2. Consider the importance of the following in getting a solid perspective on an issue, 'the complexities of life' or the worthiness of a particular leader? Discuss the value of each of the following:

- The Internet.
- The ABC. (or your favoured news outlet)
- A good novel
- A discussion group.
- Prayer.
- Humility.
- Scepticism.

You might like to rate these in order of priority
1 - as highest
and 7 as lowest.

3. Consider Proverbs 11:14, 15:22 & 24:6. (You might also like to consider 1 Corinthians 14:26-32.) Why is a group more favourable for getting a better handle on any given issue? If you were trying to get the best handle on an issue or group in the following situations, discuss what attributes, skills or demographic you might best assemble?

Determining a progress strategy for a town.

Deciding on a moral issue for our society?

Deciding on the core tenants of Christian Faith?

4. If the Church were to model a group discernment model how might it impact or benefit the wider community, especially as we face an uncertain future?

5. Discuss the relative value of the following as a foundational base of our Christian Faith. Doctrine? Morality?

6. Read the Apostles Creed (Ad 390) and discuss the following:

What do you find appealing about the Creed?

What are the bits you find the hardest to believe?

Can you be a Christian if you doubt aspects of the Apostles creed?

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, *(Catholic means universal)*
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

7. What does it mean 'To Believe'? Discuss the following:

- Certainty without doubt?
 - Confident with doubts?
 - Is Trust and Belief the same? (Can 'faith' be sometimes a synonym?)
- a. Compare and consider verses 23 & 24 in Mark 9:14-29 with verse 38 in John 9:1-41.
 - b. How might Psalm 28:6-9 help shape the biblical meaning of 'Belief'?

Notes:

8. Read James 2:18-20. Discuss the necessary relationship between Christian belief and its impact on our lives? (You might like to consider Galatians 5:6 or 1 Peter 2:24.)

9. To finish this conversation please read and consider this quote by Helmut Thielicke from 'I Believe',

"Faith means having something to hold on to and thus being grounded on that foundation which God has laid - and which is ultimately He himself. Of course, faith must not be thought of as a soft cushion on which we can self-confidently recline. Then faith would be nothing more than bourgeois religion, and the dogmas would be an air raid shelter into which the craven-hearted would creep to escape the inclemencies of life. If faith were really such a last resort, I would find it far more decent to believe in nothing and stick it out in the bleak hopelessness of chance and nothingness and thus at least be able to face life without any illusions. But the foundations on which I stand and the stay that upholds me, thanks God, are something altogether different from the soft pillow on which the comfortable repose."

Finish your time in Prayer

Please pray for general matters which concern you/us. Please also pray that our Beliefs - as stated in the creed might shape our lives to the good of our community and the glory of God.

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Faith Conversation 2 - I believe in God, the Father almighty

Part 1 - I believe in God....

1. Why is it that a desire for something often/always promises more satisfaction than does the acquiring of that something?
2. Discuss the following - We will never know everything there is to know about a person. There will always be a 'space for mystery' in relationships. Why is a 'space for mystery' difficult for us? How might a 'space for mystery' refresh and even 'drive forward' our mutual appreciation in relationships?
3. Discuss the difference between 'knowing God fully' and 'knowing everything about God'. Why does God's 'borderless being' make God the perfect antidote for our striving to be satisfied? Our striving for rest?
4. Appreciating that we can never know 'absolutely' the other, how do we gain knowledge about anyone? What disciplines do we need to advance if we would keep relationships fresh?
5. How do we know about God? Consider the following as they appear in 'Biblical' order. Might you prioritise these in any way?

i. Exodus 3:1-6	vi. Ephesians 4:11-13
ii. Psalm 19:1-4	vii. Hebrews 1:1
iii. Romans 3:21b (& Psalm 119:9-16)	viii. Hebrews 1:2
iv. 1 Corinthians 2:10-16	ix. Hebrews 11:6
v. 2 Corinthians 12:1-4	x. James 1:5
	xi. Other ?
6. Knowledge of God may be 'the tip of an endless iceberg' but the tip is beautiful, good and true. Discuss what we know of God in the light of these three adjectives.

Part 2 -the Father Almighty

7. We inevitably define words by our experiences of a word. Hence our experience of 'father', or 'fathers we have known', cannot but influence what content we put into the word 'father'. When, in the Bible, God is revealed as 'Father' we must allow the content of God's interaction with people, and all of creation, to shape the meaning of God's Fatherhood. Discuss.
8. The Bible does not present God as 'male'. The term 'Father' is better understood as defining God's character and role without a gender connotation. Discuss this, and why it might be important?
9. What stories from the Bible help us define the Fatherhood of God? You might like to consider the following areas and verses listed as starting points in your consideration:
 1. Father of all in Creation - Acts 17:24-29
 2. Father to Israel by Covenant - Ex.4:22-23, Hosea 11:1-9, Jeremiah 31:7-9
 3. Father in Redemption through Christ - Gal.3:25-29 & 4:1-7
 4. Father in relation to Christ - John 1:17-18
10. God is Almighty but the creed ties together 'Father Almighty'. Reflect on and discuss the following quote from Rowan Williams - [As we read the Bible we see that] *'God the Father Almighty is so [very] different from wish-fulfilment and projection about some all powerful character who can just do what he decides and get what he wants straight away. Instead its the discovery of what Abraham and Moses have discovered, a God who never runs out of love and liberty. God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent, whose commitment to us is inexhaustible, whose purposes for us are unfailingly generous; someone whose life is the source of our life, and who guarantees that there is always a home for us.'*

11. Another aspect of being our Father Almighty is 'Holiness'. Read and discuss the relevance of the following passage for our lives. 'So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."

And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favourites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of him during your time here as "temporary residents." (1 Peter 1:13-17)

12. Spend some time in prayer remembering especially:

- a. Those for whom the concept of 'father' has become negative.
- b. To pray that all parents might be raised to mirror the expression of fatherhood (parenthood) that is expressed in the quote from Rowan Williams in question 10 above.
- c. Other matters concerning our own/your concerns.
- d. Conclude with the Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive our sins as
we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen**

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, *(Catholic means universal)*
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

For further reflection

Why is it important that God is primarily known in Relationships rather than Ideas? What is the place of 'Ideas' in knowing God? What is the place of ideas in life?

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Faith Conversation 3 -creator of heaven and earth.

1. Read the Apostles Creed (copied in the box on this page) and discuss the following.
 - a. In what sense does it follow chronology order? (Date of events? Sequence of appreciating the deity of persons within the Trinity? Other?)
 - b. Are there things out of chronological sequence? If so, why do they appear where they are?

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, *(Catholic means universal)*
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

2. When considering the meaning of the any part of the Creed we must abandon strict sequential reading, rather we must allow later 'statements' in the creed to inform the earlier and visa versa. Discuss the attributes that mark the character/heart of God when 'creator' is allowed to be informed by statements like 'Father', 'born', 'suffered' 'was crucified' or 'rose again' or 'communion of saints' or 'forgiveness of sins', which, apart from 'Father', occur later in the sequence of the creed.

(We will return to the 'Creator's heart' later in the study)

3. Which of the following do you find hardest to believe and why?:
 - a. That God creates out of nothing (ex nihilo).
 - b. That God creates freely - without a need to satisfy any lack. (Acts 17:24-25)
4. Reconsider a. and b. above and discuss what comfort you can draw from these christian truths. You might like to consider these bible passages:
 - a. For a. above - Luke 1:37, Luke 18:18-27, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Psalm 51:10-12 or Romans 7:24-25. Mark 6:30-44.
 - b. For b. above - Ephesians 2:4-10, 3:18-19.
 - c. Also - How might 3.b. underscore the truthfulness of the Creator?
5. If God is creator of Heaven and Earth then all other things receive their 'being' as a gift. Only God has being as possession. Discuss how this truth might shape our:
 - a. Attitude to God?
 - b. Attitude to all other created things?
6. If you only knew of God from God's creation, what would you conclude about the character of God? Would God be Awful or Awesome or Amicable or Ambiguous? Discuss.

Returning to consider the Creator's heart which we explored in question 2 above.

7. Consider this extract from 'I Believe' by Helmut Thielicke and discuss the points that follow:

'To use Luther's lovely phrase, whoever sees Christ as a mirror of the Father's heart actually walks through the world with new eyes. Only after a person has looked into the heart of the Creator of all things will he/she also see 'the things' differently. For him lilies and birds, the moon and the rainbow actually become messages from this Heart. But whoever comes at it differently, trying to interpret the objects, the natural laws, or the historical process in order to find traces of divine power, will always be cheated and will finally be handed over to soulless chance or to icy infinity.

.....

Basically, its quite simple. If the world is a work of God, then it is clear that I can understand this work only by starting with its author. Of course, much still remains puzzling to me. For example, I will never be able to understand why human beings who have lived lives filled with love and meaning must fade away in old peoples' homes, arthritic and horribly emaciated. I will never understand why death tears a young mother from her children or why a great artist smashes his car into some highway abutment. If I see riddles of this sort and then try to squeeze a divine meaning out of them, I will be gripped by despair, or I will take refuge in fanciful explanations because I cannot bear the dreadful harshness of reality. However, as I said before, if I come at it from the other way, if I dare to trust that Heart which has thoughts of peace toward me, then, to be sure, I am not promised the ability to 'understand' the relationship between these thoughts of God and the riddle of life or its dark accidents, but I certainly am told that I may 'trust' this heart and that, as far as I am concerned, it will always remain faithful. That is, it will always think thoughts of intimacy and not of enmity toward me. *I really don't know what God wills in this or that*

perplexing case, but I trust in the God who does know. I myself know only one thing: that God remains loving through everything, even the darkest times. I know it simply because of one man, Jesus Christ, who never had an unloving thought. If we begin in this way with the heart of God, we will not only walk through the world with different eyes, but we also handle things differently.'

- What do you appreciate about this extract. Discuss
- With this appreciation how might we handle COVID19 differently? Discuss
- In you own context, with what you are facing - does the above extract help you to 'handle things differently'? Discuss

Spend some time in prayer which has flowed both out of this study and also in reference to your lives. Conclude with the Lord's Prayer, as follows:

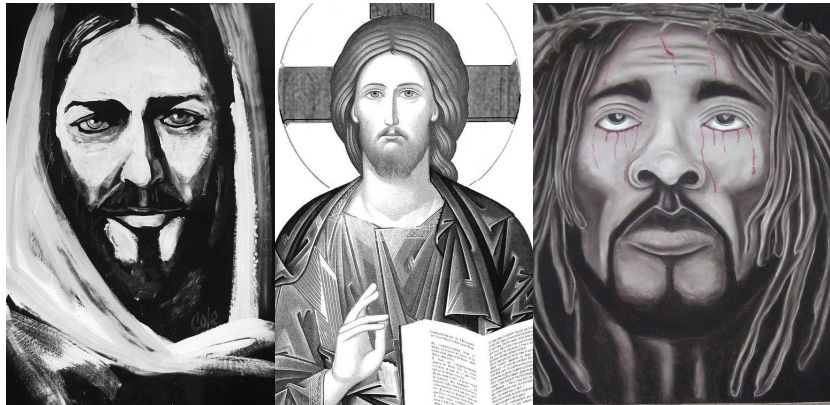
**Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive our sins as
we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen**

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Faith Conversation 4 -

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,



1. Many people have a high opinion of Jesus but they fail to see him as 'unique'. What do you imagine the 'person in the street' might easily agree with you to believe about Jesus? Discuss the strength of these imagined responses. What Bible verses might support those aspects of Jesus life?
2. Many people discount the 'Uniqueness' of Jesus. Discuss the following two possible reasons and explore a response:
 - a. The real Jesus is shrouded/lost in the 'Church approved' scriptures, church dogma and tradition. (*Consider your response in the light of 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 and Acts 26:22-26.*)
 - b. The accounts of Jesus' life from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (The 'Gospels') present not just a compelling vision of Jesus but also a vision which calls us to a challenging life of discipleship - See Mark 1:14-15, 10:42-45 and 12:31. Might the search for the 'real' person behind the Gospel accounts be an excuse to relieve them from the moral demands of Jesus?

3. The [Gospel] reports about Jesus which we have are testimonies of the faith of people who had been overwhelmed by him. There is no other way to speak of him than by means of testimony - whether for or against him.
The testimony of the overwhelmed - that is what we have before us. We can't get beyond it. For from our position on this side of the events we can't go through the testimony with undisturbed objectivity and try to extract the so-called historical Jesus from it. We can only say 'yes' or 'no'. The only possible reactions are either the confession of a Thomas, 'My Lord and my God', or the equally vehement resistance of an Archimedes, 'Get away from me and don't disturb my circles.'

I Believe, Helmut Thielicke pages 73-74

(Note - Archimedes comment is here used as a metaphor type example as these, his 'last words', were not a reference to Jesus.)

Discuss the above quote by considering:

- a. There is no other way to speak of him than by means of testimony.
 - b. The only possible reactions are either Thomas' (John 20:26-29) or a comment like that of Archimedes.
4. The Creed affirms that Jesus' sayings, like the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and his challenge to a radical love (Luke 6:27-36), cannot be separated from the events of his life. Consider this in the light of the following passages:
 - a. Matthew 11:2-6
 - b. Matthew 15:21-28
 - c. Luke 5:12-16
 - d. Luke 5:27-32
 - e. Luke 7:1-10
 - f. Luke 24:25-27

5. 'Awkwardly and slowly and with much complication and even apparent contradiction, the New Testament moves towards the extraordinary notion that the Creator of the universe is at work without interruption in the life and work of Jesus - that it is God who is doing what Jesus is doing.' (Rowan Williams in Tokens of Trust, pages 62-62) Discuss this, the deity of Jesus, in the light of the following passages:
 - a. Mark 2:1-12
 - b. Mark 4:35-41
 - c. John 1:1-18
 - d. Acts 7:54-60
 - e. 2 Corinthians 1:20
 - f. Revelation 1:17 compared with Revelation 19:9-10
6. The conclusion of the New Testament writers is that Jesus is the Unique Son of God. Consider and discuss the following quote from Rowan Williams (Tokens of Trust pages 67-68) - 'Jesus Christ,... stands at the heart of the twofold movement, of God's life towards the world and [at the same time] the world's journey to reconciliation with God. Jesus truly embodies the absolute eternal love and action of God; but what is so startling and revolutionary, what sets Christian faith apart most decisively from even its closest religious relatives, is this picture of divine life involving receiving as well as giving, depending as well as controlling. It means, among many other things, that we human beings, who live in relationships where we are both givers and receivers, both depending and controlling, can reflect the life of God in every aspect of what we are; we are no less in God's image when we acknowledge our dependence or when we offer thanks than when we are taking decisions or showing God's love to another. It also means, this surprising and difficult vision, that God never starts being in loving relationship; its an aspect of what God is eternally. Love doesn't begin only when God makes the world. (Discuss in the light of your context.)

7. St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:3 - '....no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. Discuss the complex dynamic of having Jesus as your Lord in the light of this quote from Rowan Williams, 'Trust this, live in Jesus company, and you become a citizen of a new world, the world in which God's rule has arrived. You will still be living in the everyday world in which many other powers claim to be ruling; but you will have become free of them, free to co-operate or not, depending on how far they allow you to be ruled by God. And what you do and say will become a sign of what is coming. Your life will give a foretaste of God's rule; and it will be directed to inviting as many as possible to come under the same rule, and to resisting the powers (natural and supernatural) that work against God and seek to keep people in slavery. The famous text known as the 'Beatitudes' in the fifth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel (Blessed are the poor in spirit....) isn't so much a list of rules to follow; it tells us what sort of lives show that God is in charge - lives that are characterised by dependence on God's goodness, that show forgiveness, single-mindedness, longing for peace and for justice, and patience under attack. People who live like this already belong to the new world: the kingdom is theirs' (Tokens of trust, pages 58-59)
8. Conclude in prayer - you might like to use Matthew 5:1-12, the Beatitudes, as a text to direct your prayers for yourself and others.

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Faith Conversation 5 - Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the virgin Mary

Foundational definition of this Conversation - **Incarnation** (lat. *in* and *carò*, stem *carn*, meaning 'flesh'). In the context of Christian theology, the act whereby the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, without ceasing to be what he is, God the Son, took into union with himself what he before that act did not possess, a human nature, "and so [He] was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person, forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q.21) Scripture support for this doctrine is replete, e.g., John 1:14; Romans 1:3; 8:3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:7-8; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 John 4:2, II John 7 (cf. Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Peter 3:18;4:1).

Before continuing please read Matthew 1:18-25

1. The Incarnation - Shocking

Discuss how shocking the news of the incarnation would have been for Joseph and Mary. How shocking might it have been when news of Mary's pregnancy reached their families and their village?

2. The Incarnation - Surprising

The Hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation. (T.S.Eliot). Do you find the Incarnation, as defined by the definition above, a surprise? (Discuss)

Certainly there are prophecies about the birth of the Messiah but, What hints do you see in the Bible which might have predicted the Incarnation?

3. The Incarnation - Emptying or expanding?

In Philippians 2:7 we read of Jesus Christ 'emptying himself' in the process of the incarnation. **Read** the following translation of and comments on Philippians 2:6-7 **and discuss** both its appeal and also its implications for us if we would imitate Christ :

'[Christ Jesus] precisely because he was in the form of God he reckoned equality with God not as a matter of getting but giving'. This then makes clear that contrary to whatever anyone may think about God, his true nature is characterised not by selfish grabbing, but by an open-handed giving.....

Although the word 'to empty' is used in verse 7, its meaning is too imprecise to permit one to say that Christ emptied himself of certain divine attributes. In fact, the Philippian text does not say Christ gave up anything. Rather it says that he added to himself that which he did not have before - 'the form of a servant', 'the likeness of a man'. Thus the implication is that at the incarnation Christ becomes more than God, if this is conceivable, not less than God.

It is impossible to explain such a mystery.....(Hawthorn p.87-88)

4. The Incarnation - Dwelling.

In John 1:14 we read that God the Son 'dwelt among us'. Read John 1:14-18 and list what things John noted as Jesus dwelt with them. Considering verse 16, how is it that Jesus 'expanded' the disciples? How do you feel Jesus continues to expand us?

Consider the following quote from 'Christ the Stranger: The theology of Rowan Williams', by Benjamin Myers (p.24) *[The Incarnation] is not a 'triumphant epiphany', but the shipwreck of one particular human life, a life in which God willingly endures the emptiness of history. Faith then, is never a means of escaping the torment of a bleak world; rather faith endures that torment, finding within the world an ambiguous disclosure of meaning. Thus faith is 'condemned to contradiction'.*

Does John 1:14-18 and this quote help explain why Christians can 'dwell with' vulnerable people patiently?

5. Incarnation - Yearning

The picture here is from the Icon known as The Eleousa. At his birth Jesus needed the physical protection and nurture of Mary. In the light of the following quote from Rowan Williams in 'Ponder these things' discuss the character of Jesus and your feelings in the light of his affection.



'This is an image not simply of the Virgin's 'Loving kindness' but of the love of God in search of us, as unselfconscious and undignified as the clinging child, as undignified as the father in the story of the Prodigal Son running down the road to greet his lost child, an image of the immense freedom of divine love, the freedom to be defenceless and without anxiety. God, we could say, does not care in the least if his love makes him look as if he is dependent on us, as if he needs us: that is our problem, not his.'

Writing elsewhere about the same icon, Williams has described 'the shock of seeing God neither as a distant parent nor even as (threatening) adult lover, but as a hungry child. That is what incarnation means: God does not remain at a safe distance, does not leave us to be. God is embarrassingly, devastatingly intimate'

'Christ the Stranger: The theology of Rowan Williams', by Benjamin Myers (p.69)

6. Incarnation - Learning.

Discuss the concept of Jesus, God the Son, 'learning' in the light of Hebrews 5:7-10, Hebrews 2:17-18 & Hebrews 4:14-16. How does this learning encourage you?

7. Incarnation - Mission Living

The incarnation is often considered as a model for Christian witness in a 'foreign culture'. Discuss

What 'learning' is required as we seek to be disciples of Jesus in 'foreign' cultures?

Why is 'patient Incarnational dwelling' so important if we would glorify Jesus in a foreign culture?

Should Christians live 'Incarnation-ally' in their own culture? Discuss?

8. Incarnational - Subverting

In the Incarnation, God eludes our grasp and subverts our systems of meaning from within. God is 'the breaking in on us of what is wholly unmasterable.'

[Of course] Christ is not really an alien darkness: he is the light of the world. But this light is disturbing, since it interrupts our blindness and complacency. It produces 'a kind of vertigo; it makes me a stranger to myself, to everything I have ever taken for granted.' 'When God's light breaks on my darkness, the first thing I know is that I don't know, and never did.' (Myers Ibid, p.32)

Obviously, as we have seen above the Incarnation reveals to us much about God's character but the Incarnation also has a subversive edge. 'Subversive' (adj.) is the sort of action which will lead to the overthrow of a long standing idea or a government. In what ways has the Incarnation been subversive in your life or for your concepts of meaning? In what ways has Jesus dwelling with us been subversive in the Community life of our church? Has this subversive influence been comfortable? (Mostly? Sometimes? Rarely?)

Conclude your conversation with prayer.

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(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 6 - Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

1. ‘..... we have only to pause and recall the ways in which we find goodness unsettling, suspect - even the relief we feel if an exemplary person turns out not to be quite so good after all. Faced with real goodness, our instinct is often to run for cover. And this becomes even more marked when we look for patterns of ‘scapegoating’ in our social life: we reinforce our sense of belonging together by the arbitrary identifying of some one as an enemy or threat. And when someone tries to bridge the gap thus set up and to make peace, we see deeper violence being drawn out. Within fairly recent history, the struggle for civil rights in the USA produced staggering levels of murderous violence against activists for radical justice - even, and especially, activists committed to non-violent methods. The murder of Martin Luther King in 1968 brought this to a shocking climax. If anyone takes on the responsibility for making peace they take on the risk of drawing out a violent ‘no’; so that to take responsibility for God’s credibility in the world, is charged with risk. The more fully anyone takes this responsibility, the greater the risk.’

(Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp.84-85)

Discuss this in the light of:

- a. Your experience
 - b. History
 - c. Current affairs
2. Discuss how the above quote informs an understanding of the suffering of Jesus.

3. Suffered/Suffering - ‘If this key word doesn’t ring in our ears, then all the scenes of his [Jesus’] life are shuffled into the accidental designs of a kaleidoscope. At the same time, we miss the point of his life. The point is called suffering’

(Thielicke, *I believe*, p.96)

This study explores the suffering of Christ as a means to appreciate his mission. Explore the following passages of scripture to appreciate the breadth of the suffering of Jesus. (You may like to write a word or a few words to describe the suffering indicated in these verses.)

Matthew 2:13-15	
.....	
Matthew 3:21-22	
.....	
Matthew 4:1-11	
.....	
Matthew 26:30-35	
.....	
Matthew 26:36-46	
.....	
Luke 7:11-15, John 11:33-37	
.....	
Luke 13:31-35	
.....	
(God sought man and yet men had not allowed himself to be found)	
John 2:23-25	
.....	

John 4:6-7

.....

John 6:14-15, 25-27

.....

John 6:63-66

.....

John 7:1

.....

John 7:2-6,

.....

Are there other sufferings to consider?

.....

4. 'Suffered under Pontius Pilate'. Read Mark 15:1-20. How do any of the above sufferings relate to this phrase? Are there particular aspects of suffering that are brought into sharp focus by this phrase? Discuss
5. Discuss this quote by Thieliicke - '[Jesus] is vilified and abandoned by everyone to an agonising execution - that certainly is suffering enough. And yet, in his life, that is not the particular nerve that twinges. The centre of his agony lies elsewhere. It lies in the fact that everything evil that men do to him is doubly terrible because he must measure it all against what men were meant to be. (Thieliicke, ibid. page 103.) Consider both the suffering indicated in this quote and also the extent to which Jesus took to inspire us to be 'all that we were made to be'.

6. 'Goethe said once that a person can understand only what he loves. Here [Jesus] is someone who loves as no man has ever loved. That is why he understands us as no one else does. That is why he collapses beneath a burden of understanding.' (Thieliicke, ibid. page 104.)

Do we have to love someone or something before we can understand it? Choose from any of the following and consider, What might this 'love' look like if we were going to understand:

- a. A misguided friend
- b. The rebellion of the adolescent
- c. The anger behind 'Black lives matter'
- d. The despair of the homeless.
- e. The abandon of the addict
- f. The violence of an assailant
- g. The fervour of the terrorist
- h. The passion of the convert

Prayer

Conclude this study by both thanking God for God's willingness to embrace suffering and also by bringing the suffering of the world to God in prayer.

You may like to conclude with this prayer:

O God, in whose enduring Love we trust,
bind up the wounds of those betrayed
by abuse at the hands of others.
Heal them and make them whole,
that they may once more receive and give love
with confidence in their dignity as your sons and daughters.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, you Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God forever and ever. Amen

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'

(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 7 - Crucified, Dead & Buried

1. Read John 19:17-42 and consider the following questions:

- a. In verses 25 to 27, Jesus calls into being a new family. In what way do you consider this request simply one of worldly care? In what way might it stand as a pivotal clue to appreciate the meaning of the cross? See John 11:51-52, 12:31-32, Matthew 12:46-50, Acts 2:43-42, 1 Timothy 5:1-2.
- b. In verse 30, Jesus is recorded to have said, "It is finished". Consider the double meaning of this phrase as either, the end of his life, or the completion of his work. (John 2:4, 3:14-17, 7:6, 12:27-33, 16:31-33.)
- c. Verses 31-42 make it very clear that Jesus died. Why was the death of Jesus never seriously doubted?

Aside from the most cynical, Jesus' death is universally appreciated as significant. For Christians it is central to our having peace with God. Questions 2 - 4 explore the basis and scope of that peace.

2. Jesus death as aspirational. Read John 15:12-17 and 1 Peter 2:21-25.

- a. What ethical ideals or attributes does Christ's attitude in death and his sacrifice unto death inspire in you?
- b. Why do we need powerful examples of sacrifice and service in life?
- c. How effective are the best examples of human character in curbing 'vice' in our lives? Discuss the persistent nature of moral failure (sin) in self and society, and the effectiveness of our attempts as a society to solve/control vice?

3. The Crucifixion and the Death of Christ is appreciated in proportion to the seriousness with which we view both Sin and God's Holiness. Discuss the seriousness of sin as a barrier to our 'peace' with a Holy God in the light of the following Bible passages and the quote from Thielicke (Ibid.pp.113-114):

- | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. Proverbs 6:16-19 | f. Jer. 4:23, Prov. 27:22 |
| b. Luke 17:1-2 | g. Luke 5:1-11 |
| c. 1 John 1:8-10 | h. Luke 5:20-21 |
| d. Rom. 3:9-12,23, 6:12-14 | i. Ezekiel 18:25-32 |
| e. 1 Peter 1:13-17 | |

'One may say that God is holy and just. God sees to it that "on this earth all guilt is punished,"Taken absolutely seriously, this attitude would mean that man is condemned to death, that people must perish for their offences.....

The second solution to the question of God's nature seems precisely the opposite. One may say that God is love. Everyone, good or bad, philanthropist or rascal, remains equally close to God.God becomes a giant pair of parentheses around life, and in principle no one can run afoul of God or fall out of those parentheses. But I can't warm up to this love, because it does not come from a heart that beats for me and suffers for me. This love arches over me like the cloudy sparkling firmament of a winter's night, indifferent to what is happening beneath it - indifferent to marital love or adultery, to the work of a midnight mission or a holdup on Main Street. Basically, both ways of thinking about God, whether I understand God as justice or love, come to nothing in the end. And that is the reason why, when it comes down to it, the message of the Bible exceeds all human thought and why the peace of God "passes all understanding." For here I am told something inconceivable: that God is at the same time both Just and Loving. God is just, and therefore must condemn what is unholy and sacrilegious, and nevertheless God has a heart full of compassionate love which would rather console than condemn and which overtakes the lost and brings them home.

4. The mystery of the Cross, alludes full comprehension - it is 'a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles' - but for Christians it is the 'power of God'. Consider some of the complexity of the cross through a discussion on the following words and passages.
 - a. The self-sacrifice of the good shepherd - John 10:14-18
 - b. Reconciliation and Justification - Romans 3:21-26. (See insert box below)
 - c. A Battlefield Victory - Colossians 2:13-15, Romans 7:21-25
 - d. Liberation - Romans 8:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-15.
 - e. Ransom - 1 Peter 1:18-21

Justification by Faith

Christians should never use this phrase to suggest that they are 'put right' with God by their faith. This would be like earning your own way to heaven. In fact the phrase 'justification by faith' has a quite different meaning. It is because of Jesus Christ, and not because of anything we have done or will do, that we are made right with God. But the means by which we are justified is faith. Faith is like a channel, through which the benefits of Christ flow to us. Faith is the means by which the work of Christ is applied to our lives. the very faith through which we are justified is a gift of God. Faith is not something we can achieve: it is something achieved within us by God. Everything necessary for salvation has been done, and done well, by God. (*Making sense of the cross, Alister McGrath, p.61*)

To explore the implications of 'Crucified, Dead and Buried' for self and for our community life, discuss the following three quotes

5. How then should we regard ourselves? How can we renounce the two extremes of self-hatred and self-love, and neither despise nor flatter ourselves? How can we avoid a self-evaluation which is either too low or too high, and instead obey Paul's admonition, 'Think of yourselves with sober judgement' (Rom.12:3)? The cross of Christ supplies the answer, for it call us to self-denial and self-affirmation.

(*The Cross of Christ, John Stott, pp.276*)

6. The call to self denial. The invitation of Jesus is plain: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34) Our cross is not an irritable husband or a cantankerous wife. It is instead the symbol of death to self..... Self denial is not denying to ourselves luxuries such as chocolates, cakes, cigarettes and cocktails (though it may include this); it is actually denying or disowning ourselves, renouncing our supposed right to go our own way. 'To deny oneself is.... to turn away from the idolatry of self-centredness.' St.Paul must have been referring to the same thing when he wrote that those who belong to Christ 'have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires' (Gal. 5:24) Where are the Christians who are prepared to put service before security, compassion before comfort, hardship before ease? Thousands of pioneer Christian tasks are waiting to be done, which challenge our complacency, and which call for risk. (*The Cross of Christ, John Stott, pp.278-279, 288*)
7. The Theology of the cross passes judgement upon the church where she has become proud and triumphant, or secure and smug, and recalls her to the foot of the cross, there to remind her of the mysterious and hidden way in which God is at work in the world. The scene of total dereliction, of apparent weakness and folly, at Calvary is the theologian's paradigm for understanding the hidden presence and activity of God in God's world and God's church. Where the church recognises her hopelessness and helplessness, she finds the key to her continued existence as the church of God in the world. In her very weakness lies her greatest strength. The 'crucified and hidden God' is the God whose strength lies hidden behind apparent weakness, and whose wisdom lies hidden behind apparent folly. The theology of the cross is thus a theology of hope for those who despair, then as now, of the seeming weakness and foolishness of the Christian Church. How can it survive, let alone prosper? (*Luther's Theology of the Cross, Alister E McGrath, p.181*)

Conclude in prayer.

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'

(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 8 - He Descended to the dead [into Hell]

1. Is it easy to talk about heaven? If so, why? [But - Might talk of heaven be an excuse for inaction in the face of social misery? How would you counter such an excuse? Is heaven a legitimate comfort when effective social action is frustrated?]
2. While heaven may be relatively easy to talk about, and a comfort, the talk of hell is uncomfortable and a frequent conversation stopper. Discuss your struggles with talk of, or talking about, hell? Is it every easy to talk of hell?
3. Discuss the merits of the following two appreciations of hell:
 - a. Hell is certainly not relegated solely to the date after death or after the last judgement. It can draw us into its demonic field of force here and now, as Luther liked to emphasise. For hell is separation from God in all its forms. It is ultimate forsakenness.'Anyone who loses his grip on life and no longer finds sense in it falls into the bottomless pit and knows what hell is. But even the worst loss, torment or horror need not be hell as long as I hold on to the loving hand of God which reaches out to me in my darkness, (See the example of Job). But if in my pain I also find no sense in holding on to the hand of that One who can make sense out of things and whose "higher thoughts" I can trust, then the burden of outer and inner torment can reach the critical point where it becomes a hell. [Might this aspect of hell be why some translations of the creed read, 'He descended to the dead'?]
(*I Believe, Helmut Thielicke pages 123-124*).

- b. In this life I can reject God and still enjoy life. That is because of God's grace. God's good gifts - the like of sun and rain, and of friendship and loyalty and truth - remain as present for us to freely enjoy. In God's long-suffering patience we can actually overlook God in our life without ever becoming clear about what we lose when we lose God. For at present God is making God's-self know in a word [and world] that we can ignore without being disturbed. At present God is speaking only to our faith, and we can refuse that. But one day the moment will come when we *may* see what we have believed, and when we *must* see what we have not believed. From this point of view, hell is simply the situation in which we must recognise God as God without being able to come to God. As long as I don't know that from which I have been cut off, the separation really causes me no anguish. What I don't know doesn't hurt me, and whom I don't know leaves me indifferent. But to have to look at the spring of life without being able to drink from it - that hurts. That is to suffer the torment of an exile from which there is no return.
(Thielicke. *ibid.* p.127)
4. In the light of the previous quote (3.b.) read the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31, and consider the following questions:
 - a. It is obvious that we can only speak about, and that Jesus could only meaningfully share with us, the things that lie 'beyond our world of experience', through imagery and analogies. And everyone knows that all analogies eventually 'break down'. Discuss the potential break-downs of analogy that might be conceived in this parable?
 - b. The unmistakable point of the parable is in verses 27-31. Discuss this in the light of Acts 10:39-43, Hebrews 9:27-28 & Romans 2:6-11.

The consistent Biblical witness is that our choices in this life have eternal significance and that, hence hell be a real prospect for many. It is a distressing thought that there should be such a 'dismal place of defeat and torment, a place which God's saving arms cannot reach....butto 'meet' this distress the Apostles' Creed mentions Jesus, our hope, in the phrase - 'He descended into hell'.

5. How might Luke 15:33-39, 2 Corinthians 5:20 and Galatians 3:13-14 inform our appreciation of 'He descended into hell'?
6. What might 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6 contribute to 'He descended into hell'? Might these verses indicate that Jesus descended 'to the dead'? Discuss in the light of the paraphrase extract below from Thielicke (Ibid.pp.132-133)

For us, the span of our life between birth and death is the time in which we hear the call of God and must make up our minds.
“Today (today!), when you hear my voice, harden not your hearts.” (Hebrews 3:15 and 2 Corinthians 6:1-2)
 But perhaps God still has ways of getting to us, ways that, as humankind, we do not have at our disposal.perhaps, we see this slim possibility in this most enigmatic of all verses (1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6). Might it be possible to hear, might we hope to hear,“**For you** to whom the word of salvation has been spoken, it is true that death forms the final limit to your decision: and I will even take to heart the last sigh of the dying when he says, ‘God be merciful to me , a sinner.’ **For me, however, the Lord over both the living and the dead**, no limits exist, so that my mercy may prevail. And I know how to find even the dead who call on me: all those who prayed to false God’s because they did not know me, and who now have been forsaken by their fetishes and idols; all those who were carried off in their childhood and died prematurely; and even the atheists who were drawn from my word or who heard only distorted caricature of it. My mercy has no end. Even death cannot limit it. I cannot let the lost souls go. My suffering was great enough to make up for them, too.” [My grace is larger than you wildest extravagance!]

7. Have you found your Christian calling to 'proclaim Jesus as Lord' diminished by anything in this Faith Conversation? Or, have you been challenged to witness all the more? Discuss.
8. Conclude this Faith Conversation with a time of prayer about things arising from this conversation and from both your life and, also, from our community life.

For your interest..... Extract from 'Early Christian Doctrines',
 by J.N.D.Kelly - pp.483-482

'As regards the fate of the wicked, the general view [in the early church] was that their punishment would be eternal, without any possibility of remission. As Basil put it, in hell the sinful soul is completely cut off from the Holy Spirit, and is therefore incapable of repentance; while Chrysostom pointed out that neither the bodies of the damned, which will become immortal, nor their souls will know any end to their suffering. Neither time nor friendship nor hope nor the expectation of death, nor even the spectacle of other unhappy souls sharing their lot, will alleviate their pains. Yet Basil has to confess that most ordinary Christians have been beguiled by the Devil into believing, against the manifest evidence of Scripture, that there will be a time limit. Among these must be included Gregory of Nazianzus, who on occasion seems to wonder whether eternal punishment is altogether worthy of God, and Gregory of Nyssa, who sometimes indeed mentions eternal pains, but whose real teaching envisages the eventual purification of the wicked, the conquest and disappearance of evil, and the final restoration of all things, the Devil himself included. The influence of Origen is clearly visible here, but by the fifth century the stern doctrine that sinners will have no second chance after this life and that the fire which will devour them will never be extinguished was everywhere paramount'

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on ‘The Apostles Creed’

(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 9 - On the third day he rose again;

St. Paul said, ‘If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.’

1. Read the following quote and the bible texts mentioned below.
Then consider the listed explanations for the empty tomb.

[Jesus died and on Friday evening he was laid in a tomb and] over one thing there can be no argument: on the Sunday morning the body had gone. At least five people visited the site that day confirming this, and not a single person is known to have denied it. This is remarkable, because within a few weeks the followers of Jesus were risking their lives on the streets of Jerusalem by preaching that he had come back to life, and branding his murderers as ‘wicked men’ (Acts 2:23). Yet if the tomb was not really empty, all the authorities had to do to prove the preachers deluded fools was to invite their hearers to visit the tomb! As the German theologian Paul Althaus says, ‘The resurrection proclamation could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.’

Will the real Jesus please stand up? John Blanchard, pp.104-105

Read Mark 14:42-47, 15:1-8 & John 19:38-42, 20:1-10

The explanations for the empty tomb.

- i. The women were misled where Jesus had been buried.
- ii. The body had been stolen: by Roman authorities?, the Jewish leaders?, the friends of Jesus?, unknown grave robbers?
- iii. Jesus only swooned on the cross and in the tomb revived and walked free.

2. The Ring of Truth. Consider each of the following as indicators that the Resurrection accounts have the ‘Ring of Truth’:
 - i. There is no description of the actual moment of Jesus’ resurrection.
 - ii. That women are the primary witnesses to the resurrection.
 - iii. The details of the resurrection vary, and it is difficult to put all the stories together into chronological order.
3. Discuss the significance of the following realities to underscore the immensity of conviction that the friends of Jesus must have had concerning the truth of the resurrection:
 - i. The ‘cowardice to courage’ transformation of the disciples - almost unbelievable in its sudden completeness (eg. Acts 4:13)
 - ii. The mustard seed movement - The electrifying growth of the church (see Acts 2:41, 4:4 and Acts 17:6)
 - iii. Sabbath, Sundays and symbols - For well over 1000 years, Jews had observed the Sabbath (Saturday) as a day of rest and worship in obedience to the fourth of the ten commandments. Yet almost immediately those first Christians (almost all devout Jews) began to meet for worship on ‘the first day of the week’ (Acts 20:7), which became known as ‘the Lord’s Day’ (Revelation 1:9).

Verdict 1

Dr Simon Greenleaf, the outstanding Harvard professor who died in 1853 and whose work ‘A treatise on Law of Evidence’ was considered the greatest work of its kind, became completely convinced that the apostles were telling the truth. In Greenleaf’s words, ‘It wasimpossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainty as they knew any other fact.’

4. Belief in the Resurrection of Jesus is considered not just a central tenant of the christian faith but also essential for ‘being saved’. What do we understand by ‘being saved’? Consider the proofs within the following verses that might indicate that this belief is genuinely held by someone, and hence, that ‘being saved’ has occurred?
 - i. Romans 10:9
 - ii. Romans 6:4-13
 - iii. 1 John 3:14-18
 - iv. 1 Peter 1:21-25 & 2:1-3
 - v. Matthew 25:31-40
 - vi. John 15:7-11

Verdict 2

In the nineteen-twenties journalist Frank Morison accepted the popular idea that the Gospels were basically unreliable, not least because science had disproved miracles. However, he was very impressed with the character of Jesus, and decided to write a book called ‘Jesus, the last Phase’, which would concentrate on the last week of his earthly life and reveal something of his true character. Yet when he began to sift the evidence for himself it brought about what he called ‘a revolution in my thought’. Jesus, the Last phase ‘was left high and dry, like those Thames barges, when the great river goes out to meet the incoming sea’. Instead, Morrison wrote a book entitled ‘Who moved the Stone?’, which argues powerfully for the truth of the resurrection story.’

5. The resurrection is the pronouncement of ‘YES’ on all that Jesus taught about God and all that Jesus inferred about the meaning of the cross. If Jesus is alive then his character is mine to imitate and his words about himself, God and life beyond ‘the material present’ are true. Discuss this, and Matthew 6:25-34, Matthew 11:12-30 and Matthew 20:25, in the light of the Resurrection.
6. Close both in prayer and also in the declaration of the following Statement of Faith.

We are not alone

We are not alone,
we live in God’s world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others
by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God’s presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God.

Verdict 3

Lord Lyndhurst was one of the greatest minds in British legal history, eventually serving as High Steward of Cambridge University. In a document found among his private papers after his death in 1863 he gave this modest but powerful verdict: ‘I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never broken down yet.’

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on ‘The Apostles Creed’

(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 10 - he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father

[Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, “Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.’ You are witnesses of all these things. “And now I will send the Holy Spirit, just as my Father promised. But stay here in the city until the Holy Spirit comes and fills you with power from heaven.”
Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven. So they worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy. And they spent all of their time in the Temple, praising God. (Luke 24:45-53)

1. Jesus said. ‘My kingship is not of this world;’ (John 18:36). Is Heaven the Kingship of Jesus? Is it a place to be directed to, (‘above?’) or better defined by its authority and its character? Who is its authority? How might you know the character of heaven? Discuss. You may like to consider the following:
 - a. Authority - Philippians 2:9-11, Colossians 1:19-20, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, John 14:6-9
 - b. Character - Revelation 21:4, 22:1-5, Hebrews 1:1-3a, Corinthians 13:4-7
2. Read 1 Corinthians 13:13. Might these three things abide in Heaven? If so, what shape would their abiding take in the ‘lives’ of the residents of Heaven?

3. Consider & Discuss the following quote:

Heaven is not simply ‘above’, so that we lift our eyes to see it; it surrounds us on all sides. It is that ‘depth of being’ [which is an entirely non-spatial dimension]..... The old Gothic and Byzantine painters had that same insight when they painted heaven gold instead of blue and selected it as a background for the human face.

That style, it seems to me, shows a radical change in our times. Today when someone paints a portrait they try to bring out the characteristics of their subjects with near photographic detail, taking pains to over-accent the subject’s ‘individuality.’ A clever photographer, too employs lighting effects that can turn even a Milquetoast [bland uninspiring person] into a character study. Things are quite different with those painters of the golden heaven. The individuality of faces is hardly brought out at all, and the drapery is stylised. But that makes no difference. The painters are trying to tell us that the essential thing about humankind is not ‘unique individuality’ but the fact that every person stands before the background of heaven. That is, all are referred to the glory of God, reflecting something of that glory in our own countenance. Heaven is not a space overhead to which we lift our eyes; it is the background of our existence, the all-encompassing lordship of God within which we stand.

(I Believe, Helmut Thielicke pages 192-193).

***The Ascension when celebrated is sometimes considered a
‘Festival of Christ’s Lordship &
of our adoption as God’s Children’.
We will be considering this as we explore the remaining questions.***

4. What work had Jesus completed when ‘he ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of God’ ? (See Hebrews 4:1-4, 10:11-28.)
5. Discuss the confidence that the ascension gives us from the following Bible passages:
 - i. Hebrews 4:14-16
 - ii. Hebrews 6:16-20
 - iii. Hebrews 7:23-25
 - iv. Romans 8:34-39
6. The wonderful truth of the Ascension, leading to an appreciation of the Lordship of Christ and of our adoption as God’s children, determines our focus in life. Consider this in the light of the following passages:
 - i. Hebrews 10:19-25
 - ii. Hebrews 12:18-25
 - iii. Hebrews 13:1-6
 - iv. Hebrews 13:13-17

7. Discuss the following extract, ‘If it is true [that all authority in Heaven and on Earth has been given to Jesus and hence,] that God directs the drama of history, [and so] then [that all] contrary powers are destined to serve God... Then even the most perplexing mishap in life, which otherwise might infuriate me and give me the wrong ideas about God, forms merely one small stone in the mosaic that fits into a picture from ‘heaven’s point of view. I don’t have the slightest inkling of the whole design, but if I could see it in its entirety I would be ashamed of my unbelief. God is weaving a tapestry which I now see only from the wrong side; if I lose sight of the hands that are weaving it, the meaninglessness will make my blood run cold. But whoever has known Christ has seen not only the hands that do the weaving but also the heart that devises the woven design. And my now seeing the tapestry of life only from the wrong side kindles the deepest passion, as Kierkegaard once put it, to be close to that heart, drawing comfort from it and resting in it’
(Thielicke. *ibid.* pp.197-198)
8. When Jesus ascended, he ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. Read Ephesians 4:10-16 and discuss what gifts he gives to the church and for what purpose are these gifts. Might these gifts and their purpose help us to discern our purpose in life?
9. How do you feel that Jesus always lives to make intercession for us? (Hebrews 7:25)
10. Close in a time of praise to our ascended Lord and in intercession for others.

*O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
spread His praise from shore to shore!*

*He who loves us, ever loves us, changes never; nevermore!
He who dies to save his loved ones intercedes for them above;
He who called them his own people, watches over them in love!*

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed' (As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 11 - - and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

1. Read Acts 17:26-31. Discuss the following:
 1. What or when are the 'times of ignorance'?
 2. What is the 'now' that ushers in the call to repentance? (See also Mark 1:14-15)
 3. On what basis does God Judge? How might we know the shape of that basis? (See John 1:14-18 & John 4:8)
 4. How can we have assurance that God will so judge the world?
2. **The Judgement of God on the living**
 - a. Read Acts 7:54-60
 - i. What is the significance of Jesus standing? Might Jesus be making a judgement about an action?
 - ii. In what circumstances might Jesus be standing today?
 - iii. If Jesus is passionate about such things, how might that impact upon our actions/choices as Christian people?
 - iv. Read Acts 9:1-20. How might this passage be linked as an outworking of Jesus standing in judgement? Discuss how Grace and judgement are linked?
 - b. Explore further the idea that 'where God's judgement on sin is pronounced so also does God's grace abound'.
 - i. Genesis 2:15 compare Genesis 3:20-24
 - ii. Genesis 4:8-14 compare Genesis 4:15-16
 - iii. Genesis 6:1-7 compare Genesis 6:7, 17-18, 9:1-7
 - iv. Genesis 11:1-11 compare Genesis 12:1-3
 - v. Romans 5:18-21
 - vi. Mathew 5:43-48

- c. Read Romans 1:24-32.
 - i. What did these people do? and, How is God's judgement pronounced on them? What is your opinion of people who are filled with such 'wickedness'?
 - ii. Now read Romans 2:1. What do you think St.Paul is trying to tell us about ourselves? Discuss.
- d. As we have seen in question 2.c., God does bring a judgement on sin which leads to a punishment even within this life. But does God bring specific punishments on people now? Discuss in the light of:
 - i. On the one hand - Acts 5:1-11 & Acts 12:20-23
 - ii. On the other hand - Luke 13:1-5 & John 9:1-5
 - iii. Also - 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:3-5
 - iv. Also - Matthew 18:15-20 & 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 (see also 2 Corinthians 2:5-11)
- e. What opinion or advice does the Bible offer when people who are tempted to exercise judgement on others? Read and discuss the following:
 - i. Matthew 5:38-42
 - ii. Matthew 7:1-5
 - iii. Romans 12:19-20
 - iv. James 4:11-12
- f. Consider and discuss the cross of Christ as a moment of Judgement. (See John 12:27-33 & Colossians 2:13-14)
- g. Consider and discuss the coming of the Holy Spirit as a moment of Judgement. (See John 16:7-11)

3. Judgement Later

- a. Explore the following Bible passages and discuss the criteria on which God will judge at some future date:
 - i. Matthew 25:31-46
 - ii. Romans 2:6-11 & John 5:25-29
- b. Jesus is identified as both being integral to our acceptance by God and also our means to avoid the coming judgement. (see Acts 4:10-12, John 5:24 John 14:6) Discuss the following:
 - i. What was 'the way' of Jesus? (Matthew 5:43-44, 14:14, 20:28, 22:15-16, 22:39) Could you imagine a more worthy 'way' of coming to God? Discuss.
 - ii. When measured by worthy values, as lived by Jesus, we feel unworthy candidates for salvation, where do we look for hope? Discuss in the light of Romans 3:21-26.

4. The Return of Jesus

- a. Read the following passages and discuss the teachings about the return of Jesus and its implications for our lives.
 - i. Matthew 24:36-44
 - ii. Matthew 24:45-51
 - iii. 2 Peter 3:8-13
- b. Does the knowledge that Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead:
 - i. discourage our action 'to right the wrongs' that we witness in the world? Discuss. (You might like to consider Colossians 3:1-4 and 12-17)
 - ii. Discomfort or comfort? (Please consider the extract on page 4 from I Believe by Helmut Thielicke pp.213-214)

5. Conclude in prayer.

*And the world and its desire are passing away,
but those who do the will of God live forever. (1 John 2:17 - NRSV)*

Don't think, though, that these dreams of future fulfilment for the world have nothing to say to me here and now, as I plan to have a picnic in the woods tomorrow and then the following day, to welcome my colleagues back to work with a cheery 'Good morning'. My knowledge of that end of all things will profoundly affect today and tomorrow. I will be less upset by the painful occurrences because I know that these grievous moments are but stages on that road which one day will end in victory for God. They are accounted for in the purposes of God's 'higher thoughts'. I need no longer to be bent on goals with a frenzied fanaticism, for the knowledge that all shall one day pass away provides me with a certain perspective, a whiff of that 'having, as though I did not have' which St. Paul described so remarkably.

..... Whoever lives with God, filled with the certainty that everything passes away - the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the statue of Liberty, and my beloved garden - and that in the midst of this passing God's Lordship shines forth, that person lives completely in the present. The burden of our past and all the untamed areas in our life are taken from us and lain on another [, on Jesus]. The future, too, ceases to be filled with worry and spectres of anxiety. It is true that I don't know *what* is coming, but I know *Who* is coming. Therefore I can drain the moment in which I live, laughing and weeping, almost (but not entirely) exultant to the skies, almost (but not entirely) troubled to death, and in either case with the face of God shining upon me. For 'the world and its desire are passing away' - its desire and its anxiety, the illusion of its progress and its desire for annihilation - the world and its desire are passing away, 'but those who do the will of God live forever.' And we can catch a fleeting glimpse of the magnitude of the future by the down payment we already have received - [the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness towards us in Jesus Christ, our new birth into a living hope and the seal of the Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of God's Glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14, 2:7 & 1 Peter 1:3)]

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed' (As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 12 - I believe in the Holy Spirit

1. Read Acts 2:1-47 and discuss the following questions:
 - a. From 2:1-4 - What understanding and emotion arise for you in the imagery of:
 - i. the sound like a rush wind. (Ezekiel 37:9-14)
 - ii. the tongues of fire. (ref. Exodus 3:1-6 and 13:17-22)
 - b. What were the tongues of Acts 2:4? What is the significance of this gift of tongues which seems to only occur 4 times in the New Testament and only in Acts? (See Acts 2:4-8, 8:14-17, 10:44-48 and 19:1-6) You might like to consider this in the light of Acts 1:8. Discuss.
 - c. How would you summarise in one sentence the main thrust of Peter's sermon after being emboldened by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14-36)? What might your conclusion tell us about a key aspect of the nature of and of the ministry of the Holy Spirit? (Refer to John 16:14-15).
 - d. Considering Acts 2:37-42 -
 - i. What is repentance?
 - ii. What 'inner' reality does the 'outward' action of Baptism speak of?
 - iii. What would be the outward sign that the Holy Spirit has been gifted to someone? Discuss both the joy evoked when the following outwards signs of the Spirit are evident and also the confusion/sadness which exists when these outward signs are scant.
 - Acts 2:43-47
 - Galatians 5:22-24
 - 1 Corinthians 12:4-7
 - Ephesians 5:15-20

2. Consider the role of the Holy Spirit in creation. Discuss creation in the following:
 - i. Of the world - Genesis 1:1-2 (Compare & discuss Luke 1:35)
 - ii. Of the Church - Acts 1:8, Romans 5:5, 1 Peter 1:1-2, Galatians 4:4-7, 5:25-26 & 6:1-10 & 2 Corinthians 13:14.
 - iii. Of Individuals - Psalm 51:1-14, Jeremiah 31:33-34, Ezekiel 36:26-27, 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 & 2 Corinthians 5:14-17.
3. Discuss your appreciation of God the Spirit. In particular can you testify about the elements mentioned in the following quote - 'Recognition of the divine status of the Holy Spirit sprang at root from Christian experience. The power of God displayed in the gift of faith, God's grace on a daily basis, support in the face of opposition and suffering, the deep sense of the communion with God, and the knowledge that the risen Christ shared in the being of God were all overwhelming and inescapable realities of Christian experience in the early days of the church.' (The Holy Trinity, Robert Letham, P&R, page 62)
4. To appreciate the personhood of the Holy Spirit - Consider the following passages and discuss the personal characteristics identified:
 - i. Mark 3:28-29
 - ii. Mark 13:11
 - iii. John 14:15-17.....
 - iv. John 16:12-15
 - v. Acts 5:3-4
 - vi. Acts 8:29, 39 & 16:6-10
 - vii. Romans 8:26-27
 - viii. Galatians 4:6
 - ix. Ephesians 4:30

Why is it important to you that the Holy Spirit is 'personal'?

5. Read 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 and discuss the importance of the Spirit as we not only think about God but also seek to understand the Bible or to proclaim its truths. Discuss this in the light of John 16:12-15 and also as you reflect on the insight of this quote from Thielicke:

The only knowledge of God is God's self-knowledge. Only God's own Spirit knows the depth of God's divinity. When we speak about God, it is usually a matter of our own ideals which we project on heaven. Maybe that is how the childish idea of an old man with a long beard arose. To many people it seems fitting that such a doddering old man, whose helplessness causes one to smile, should dispense simpleminded admonitions. But the facts are disturbingly and delightfully different. As Luther says, Jesus Christ is the mirror of his Father's heart. In him is God as God sees God's self.

..... 'revelation' means simply that God will give us his Spirit so that we can thus participate in God's self-knowledge...., that is, that [the Triune] God gives us [the gift of the] Spirit so that we may have fellowship with God and may have a look into God's heart. In that way we are rescued from the awful enchantment of our egos and are no longer imprisoned by the airy spectres of our wishful [or our frightful] thinking [about God]. (*Thielicke Ibid.pp 226-227*)

6. Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 & 13:1-13 and reflect on the place of the Spirit to gift you with a capacity to love. Allow your reflection on this passage to shape a time of prayer. You may like to begin or conclude this time of prayer with the following prayer from Thomas Cranmer:

O Lord, who has taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth, send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the very bond of peace and all virtues, without which whoever liveth is counted dead before thee; grant us this for thy Son Jesus Christ's sake.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church, (*Catholic means universal*)
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Dove Descending (*From Little Gidding, by T.S.Eliot*)

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.

We only live, only suspire [*suspire = breathe deeply*]
Consumed by either fire or fire.

For something
extra,
You might like
to reflect on
this text from
Eliot's
'The four
Quartets'

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'
(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

**Faith Conversation 13 - the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,**

1. In previous studies we have appreciated that God is Trinity and hence essentially relational. This essential is to characterise all who would be embraced by God. Discuss the broad nature of the faith community that is anticipated when we greet one another with the words, 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.' 2 Corinthians 13:14.
2. What examples of herd mentalities in churches have you seen? Discuss the certain 'mentalities' that you have noticed in some churches? (or in ours?). What types of pressures are used to encourage conformity? How do we counter herd mentality pressures? Discuss in the light of the following quote from Rowan Williams (page 106 of Tokens of Trust).

'The slogan of the Church's life is 'not without the other. In the Church there is no I without a you. There is no I without we. Yet that doesn't mean that the identity of the Church is a 'herd' identity, with everyone's individuality submerged in the collective. The difference between I and you remains real - otherwise there would be no challenge about it. You may have noticed that few churches are characterised by drab sameness; when people try to create a herd mentality in the Church, whether in a local congregation or in a wider institution, it tends to break down dramatically, sooner or later.'

3. Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 and consider our Church.
 - a. Is our Church made up of a similar strange mix of people as existed in Corinth? Do we have our own particular mix? Discuss how a strange or even uncomfortable mix of people might be the glory of the Church?
 - b. What does a broad diversity in the church communicate to the members? To enquirers? To the wider community?
 - c. Conversely, might the absence of 'a strange mix' undermine both the beauty of the God's love and the welcome we seek to proclaim?
 - d. Can we have this glory without tensions? If not, how can we endure as a cohesive community?
 - e. Can we encourage diversity in our Church?
 - f. How beautifully does the 'Body' image of 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 encourage diversity? If our church was a body, which part do you think is potentially out of proportion? Which is suffering from neglect? Discuss.
4. Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15. Discuss instances where you have seen the material wealth of one church benefiting another church? Is this one example where we see the reality of the universal church? Does this sharing and interdependence from one local church to another/others demonstrate fully the reality of the universal (catholic) church? What other dimensions might have been intended by the word 'universal'? Discuss.
5. Might the previous question have helped us appreciate the 'communion of saints'? What other attributes or actions of the church might express the reality of the communion of the Saints? Consider Colossians 1:3-4, 2:11-12, 3:1-4, 3:11(Galatians 3:28-29) & Colossians 4:2-4

6. Further to question 1, What might it mean that the Church is Holy? Discuss how this word can, at one and the same time, be both 'actually' and also 'aspiration-ally' true. How can we as a church grow to be more Holy? Discuss in the light of Ephesians 4:15-16 and Hebrews 10:19-25.
7. Why might it be important to hold a belief in the church universal and the communion of saints as we interpret the words of scripture? Discuss this as you interact with 1 Corinthians 14:29, 1 John 4:1-3 & the following extract from 'Time for Church? Evangelicals, Scripture and Conversational Hermeneutics' by John B Thomson.

'..... The Church itself is a community of communities spanning time and the globe[to form a] hermeneutical (interpretive) community. As a hermeneutical community the church will be embodied in contextual ways leading to different understandings of what the word of the Lord means for particular communities in distinctive contexts.if the rich story of God is to be articulated [then a] conversation includ[ing] all God's people as participants, in particular the weak and marginal [needs attention].This will act as a check on leadership cults and the potential for fragmentation consequent upon individual or sectarian interpretations of Scripture. Furthermore this approach [will] dispose[the church] to be critically open to new insights which raise questions about past interpretations of Scripture as sound learning ... Of course, [an open conversation about Scripture interpretation]demands humility, patience and generosity where discernment is complex and contested within the church (such as over same sex relationships). It is Scripture in the Church, which will enable us to hear God's word to us today, rather than Scripture independent of the Church.To hear God's word in the interplay of Scripture and [the] Church is to let [the] stories and voices [of all the many fellow travellers of different Christian traditions and convictions] contribute to the [interpretive] conversation.'

8. In the Bible there are scant details on the formal organisation of the Church, however there are sections which indicate the character required of those who might have positions of authority. Read 1 Peter 5:1-5 paying special attention to the metaphors used.
(If time permits you might like to read 1 Timothy 3:1-13)
9. Discipline is also an important topic in the church. How do we remain open and welcoming even as we maintain order and curb immorality? Consider and discuss Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Cor. 5:1-5 compare with 2 Cor. 2:5-11 & James 5:19.
10. Discuss the church's role in the community as salt? As light? (See Matthew 5:13-16) As leaven? Is the Church always a little more for its members than for its non-members? If so why? If not why not? How do you understand the role of the church in the wider community? Discuss.
11. The communion of Saints is a community in communion with God. You might like to discuss some of the following as being helpful for our Church as we commune with God.
 - a. Prayer and Meditation
 - b. Reading Scripture & Reflection
 - c. Fasting - often with Prayer
 - d. Small groups - conversation and prayer
 - e. The 'Counsels of perfection' -
Chastity & Poverty & Obedience.
 - f. The Sacraments - Baptism and The Lord's Supper.
 - g. As we share in witness and mission - Wesleyan 'works of mercy' :
 - i. Visiting the sick and those imprisoned - feeding and clothing those in need - Matt.25
 - ii. Financial activities - earning saving - giving.
 - iii. Service toward communal or societal needs such as seeking justice, opposition to slavery and other social justice issues.

Conclude your time in prayer for the Church.

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed' (As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

Faith Conversation 14 - the forgiveness of sins

1. 'Society in general seem to be tolerant of all sorts of behaviour, yet deeply unforgiving.' Discuss.
Is forgiveness counter cultural?
2. Jesus taught about and lived forgiveness (Luke 17:3-4, Mark 14:29-31, 66-72 with 16:6-7 and Colossians 2:13-15,) and his followers appreciated that being forgiven by Jesus should evoke forgiveness in us for others (Colossians 3:13). Read the passages listed and discuss in the light of the following:
 - a. The phrase 'The forgiveness of sins' is positioned, in the Creed, after introducing the community of 'the Church'. Might this positioning instruct us that as forgiveness was at the heart of Jesus life and ministry so must it be a core characteristic of the Church's life and witness? Discuss
 - b. Forgiving others can be a painful task which may require me not just to 'feel and name' the offences done against me but also to contemplate my own shortcomings. It can be very painful. Discuss in the light of the following paraphrase from Thieliicke, and then consider 2.c & d. on page 2.

'.....I could leave the other alone and in the pain of their failures or I can step toward them and acknowledge that yes they 'fell' but they are not alone I am also capable ... the same thing that made them mean, hateful and guilty towards me is in my heart as well..... I step before them in forgiveness not to diminish what they did but to admit that sin and failure is not theirs alone. And this lightens their load in the sense that I do not hold them in distain for their failures!'

- c. Will forgiving another always lighten their load?
- d. Might forgiveness sometimes lighten your load?
Discuss the truth that might be found in the following saying:

Withholding forgiveness from another person is like wishing them to drink poison but then drinking the poison yourself'.

3. Forgiveness can be a long job. Read and discuss the following extract from Rowan Williams:

[In the light of Christ, Christians] can say that [forgiveness is] possible; but God forbid that they should try to force the pace for someone whose hurt they don't know at first hand. Nor should forgiveness be confused with leniency or making light of an outrage. A person may be forgiven by their victim, yet it will still be right for them to serve out a sentence or in other ways have to deal with the consequences of an action.

Rowan Williams (page 152-153 of Tokens of Trust).

- a. How can we learn forgiveness?
4. Failure and hurt can be reclaimed, not by us but by God - and if possible for God, that makes it possible for us. [And] when we are prepared to turn not only to God but to each other, in the confidence that something is possible; even on the far side of terrible hurt and alienation, the world becomes larger. Discuss why this article of the Creed might be most necessary to proclaim today:
 - a. Locally?
 - b. Interpersonally?
 - c. Internationally?

5. If a Christian community is doing its job it will not just be a forgiving community but a repenting community! Discuss why repentance, which says that you don't have to be paralysed by failure, is one of the most effective signs of the Church's appeal to the truth of the supernatural than is human competence and abundant resources?
 - a. Why do people find repentance difficult?
 - b. How do we learn repentance in:
 - i. Our Worship Services?
 - ii. In our community Life?
6. Can one generation say sorry or repent of a previous generations wrong doing? (See Daniel 9:1-8, 16, Nehemiah 9:2 & Leviticus 26:40-42). Discuss how this might be relevant as the Church acknowledges institutionalised sin or the sin of past generations in their church. You may like to discuss this in the light of the following extract:

A closer look at Leviticus 26:40-44 suggests that one reason the present generation needs to repent of the sins of their forebears is that sin causes a rupture that must be repaired. What's required is not just that the present generation confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors, but also that they "make amends (yiršû) for their iniquity" (26:41b, 43). If the damage one generation does is not fixed in their own day, that damage does not simply disappear at their death. The wrong must be righted, and the job may well fall on their descendants.

(From Should We Repent of Our Grandparents' Racism? Scripture on Intergenerational Sin By Dr. Michael Rhodes on June 19, 2020)

7. Read Hebrews 9:27-28, 1 Peter 3:18 and John 5:24, then discuss in the light of this extract from Thielicke:

Jesus is the statute of true humanity. When I have to appear at the last judgement, God will see me in him who has bound his fate to mine. [Though doomed forever because of our many sins(Ephesians 2:1)]. Jesus [will say] this person no longer is what they have in their background; that is really behind them. I have crossed it out and taken it upon myself as my burden. I have blotted out the accusation and nailed it to my cross'" (Colossians 2:13-14). [Jesus will say] "Father and Judge, if you ask who this is, I answer that they are one for whom I died and that I have suffered for them and because of them. I have become their brother, and they have let me adopt them. They knew that their hands were empty. They knew about the stain on their conscience. They knew that there was no escape form their wretchedness. And he/she was pleased when I said to them, 'Be clean!' They accepted my offer to bear everything for them and with them [on the cross]. He/she stood beneath my cross and said, 'I want to stay here by thee. Despise me nor, I pray'. Therefore Father, he/she is yours and mine, and I bring him/her to your now. As they looked to me with eyes of trust, look upon them now as my brother/sister and let them be with me always in your peace and in your glory'

Prayer.

Spend time

1. In praise that we have been forgiven
2. In praying for the situations where we, our friends and our world are struggling with issues of forgiveness.
3. Pray for wisdom and courage as we explore ways to encourage repentance and forgiveness to be core values in our church's life and witness.

I Believe - 15 Faith Conversations on 'The Apostles Creed'
(As explored by Eden Uniting Church)

**Faith Conversation 15 - the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.**

John 11:25-26

*Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.
Do you believe this?'*

1. Is a belief in the afterlife an excuse to do nothing about the world's problems, or a comfort when all our striving to solve the problems are exhausted? Or, is it a motivation energising you for the betterment of society and the renewal of the environment?
 - a. Discuss and justify your answers?
 - b. Are Excuse, Comfort and Motivation reasons why the afterlife is an almost universal social phenomenon?
 - c. What other reasons might explain the prevalence of this belief across cultures and for millennia?
2. Resurrection is not simply a bodily reanimation and transformation after physical death. It is also, according to St.Paul, a moral or spiritual renewal before death. What is involved in this spiritual resurrection and when did it take place? Discuss in the light of the following Bible passages:
 - a. Galatians 2:20
 - b. Colossians 3:1-17

(There are many other passages which reflect this reality like Ephesians 2:1-10 and Romans 6:1-14)

3. Resurrection as a bodily reanimation and transformation after physical death is believed because of Jesus' resurrection. (Colossians 1:18). [We specifically explored the historicity of this in conversation 9.] Consider the following verses to appreciate the consequences of the Resurrection that are the same in the case of Christ and his people.
 - a. Everlasting - Romans 6:9 and 1 Corinthians 15:42, 52-54.
 - b. Transformation - Luke 24:31 & 1 Corinthians 15:42-3, 50-4.
 - c. Ascension to Heaven - Acts 1:9-11 & 1 Thessalonians 4:17
 - d. Exaltation - Acts 2:32-33 & 2 Timothy 2:12
4. What is your picture of everlasting life in Heaven? Share your thoughts and then continue to shape your understanding as you read the following passages:
 1. Isaiah 65:17-25 (you might also consider Isaiah 59:15-22)
 2. Matthew 8:5-13 & 9:9-13
 3. Romans 15:13 & Hebrews 12:1-2
 4. 1 Corinthians 13:4-13
 5. Revelation 7:9-17
 6. Revelation 21:22-27 & 22:1-5
5. *Read Revelation 21:4* - Why might we have a tear on our cheek, or need comforting, when we enter heaven? What for you will be the nature or the content of the comfort of heaven?
6. Read Hebrews 3:1-19 & 4:1-16 and as you do, pay special attention to the ideas of 'heavenly call', 'faithfulness' and 'rest'. Where do we find confidence about our place in heaven? What place does 'our striving' play in entering that rest?

6. Continued

After reading these two chapters from the Book of Hebrews you might like to continue to discuss the concepts of 'rest' and 'our confidence' in the light of the following adapted extract from Believe by Helmut Thielicke pp.246-247:

*Where have all the flowers gone?
Young girls picked them, every one
Where have all the young girls gone?
Gone to young men, every one
Where have all the young men gone?
Gone to soldiers, every one.....
Where have all the soldiers gone?
Gone to graveyards, every one
Where have all the graveyards gone?
Gone to flowers, every one.....
When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?*

*A song by
Pete Seeger
(made
famous by
Miss
Marlene
Dietrich)*

Can we ever learn that everything which once loved and laughed and bore a live, softy whispered name will fade into the anonymity of the endless cycle? No, we can never learn.....
.....[BUT one] has broken open the cycle and prepared a straight path to the Father's house for us, just as he burst open the grave on Easter morning. That is **one** grave from which more than merely flowers grew. Instead of having to ask, 'Do you know where the flowers have gone?' we now have another question: "Dost ask who may that be? Christ Jesus, it is he"

*With our own strength is nothing done
Soon we are lost, dejected
But for us fights the rightful Man
Whom God himself elected, You ask, "Who may this be?"
Christ Jesus it is he,
The Lord Sabaoth's Son
Our God, and he alone shall hold the field victorious
(From Martin Luther - A mighty Fortress is our God)*

7. In the light of all that we have discovered about our inclusion in the 'life everlasting', how should we now live? And why is 'The Lord's Prayer' the apt last conversation for these 'Faith Conversations' concerning the Apostles Creed?

**Our Father in Heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen**

[As an encouragement in prayer, please read the following extract from Tokens of Trust by Rowan Williams p.155.....

It has been said that prayer is not primarily a matter of getting oneself where we can see God so much as getting ourselves where God can see us - that is, getting ourselves into the light of God's presence, putting aside our defences and disguises, coming into silence and stillness so that what stands before God is not the performer, the mask, the habits of self-promotion and self-protection but the real me.'

Let us Pray

A last thought to ponder..... Other than Jesus, there are only two people named in the Apostles Creed. Might they stand for two responses that we could have to Jesus and to the Christian faith as declared in the Apostles Creed? Discuss these responses and share your personal response story.

I hope that these Faith Conversations have enabled us to see a little more of God's self revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.