

Why Creeds?

It was a typical February Sunday, cold and wet and blowy, but even so the church was packed – and not just the church building; even the yard outside the doors was crammed with folk. For word had gone round that the old man himself was going to come, maybe even speak – that this would be the very last chance to see him, at least in this life.

A ripple ran through the crowd, necks craning to get one last glimpse of him, and a sigh as they saw him supported – no, in truth carried – by two of the brothers to the pulpit. Many wept, openly wept, to see that huge powerful frame shrunk to a feeble shadow of what it had been.

Then total silence, as everyone strained to catch his last words – what would he say, here at the end? Would he just say goodbye, or would he give them something special, something to remember him by?

He gave them even more: in the whisper of a man leaving time behind he gave them words that have rung down the centuries: "Lords, brothers and sisters, be joyful, and keep your faith and your creed, and do the little things that you have seen me do and heard about.

And as for me, I will walk the path that our fathers have trod before us."

Two days later, on Tuesday 1 March, Dewi ap Non – Saint David – died. But his words live on, and even now, a millennium and a half later, every schoolkid in Wales, whatever their mother tongue, knows "gwnewch y pethau bychain" – do the little things.

So the tale was told to me, but not in school – ignorant Sais that I am, I first heard it barely a decade ago.

When I heard it, I saw how David's words were rooted deep in the Celtic tradition: of an unconquerable joy in Christ; of a living faith in Christ's love and kingship nurtured in everyday life; of a daily life overflowing with that faith and joy. A threefold understanding familiar from Patrick, from Columba, from all the Celtic saints.

But – keep your creed? What was that about? Why did David put my creed on the same footing as my faith? Surely he could not value a mere list of things to agree to as much as a living faith in a living Lord?

It took me quite a time to see where I was wrong: to recognise that the commonly held view of a creed as a list of dogmas to be accepted is utterly false. Whatever those argumentative bishops in Nicaea, Ephesus and Constantinople thought they were doing, what they produced was

something completely different: a description of someone to believe in.

That's believe IN, not believe THAT.

And later: in the Middle Ages, you still did not have to believe the creeds: you simply had to agree that the Church approved them – the idea that the creeds were used to trap heretics is pure Hollywood. The proof of this is very simple: there was a list of things to believe, but it wasn't a creed: it was the Catechism. Which nobody used.

No: the creed was not used to teach or control thinking; it was used to say 'I love you, God!' – to wrap your self in his love, to commit yourself to his care.

So to Celtic saints like Dewi, the creed was a means of asserting trust in God, of invoking God's presence – and therefore invoking His protection and companionship. You hold on to your creed as you hold on to your lover – and not believing some clause or other

was no more serious than getting the name of your lover's second cousin wrong.

Hold to your creed, therefore. And don't be afraid to use it, not to assert truth, but to embrace a living, loving God, and to wear his faith and his love as a breastplate against the attacks of evil, whether human, physical or spiritual evil.

In the Irish tradition, the creed became a model for other creeds, for other breastplates, which were associated with many of the great Irish and Scottish saints. Saint Patrick's Breastplate – versified as 'I bind unto myself this day' – is perhaps the most well-known, but Saint Dallan's Breastplate – 'Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart' – is almost as well-known, and probably sung even more often.

So 'hold to your creed' – 'wear your armour' – 'tell God you love Him' – all these are one and the same, and so I have tried to follow in the footsteps of far greater saints, and provided more breastplates, more creeds, more ways of saying, 'God, I love you, I trust you, I walk out with courage, trusting in you and in your love.' They are just little things, compared with the Breastplates of Patrick and his fellows; but Dewi Sant told us to do the little things, and I have tried to obey him.

Why Seasons?

The Church has traditionally used and structured the natural cycles of the world, to train the learner and to make sure the whole width of Christian spirituality, understanding and vision is covered.

So each day was structured by the Hours; the month was structured by the Lord's Days - the weeks being conventional phases of the moon; and the year was (eventually) structured by two (or three) interlocking cycles known as the 'Proper of the Time' and the 'Proper of the Saints' (with the 'Proper of Mary' sometimes separated out).

Nowadays the Church seems to have abandoned this. Now there are a few important feasts, and some short seasons associated with them, but otherwise the year has been dumped into 'ordinary time' - dozens of weeks with no structure or organisation at all. The consequences are obvious. Huge areas of Christian spirituality, understanding and life are being rapidly forgotten - or worse, rediscovered in other traditions and rejected as unchristian!

It has even got to the point where people are criticising the Church for not teaching about some particular topic, and inventing a new feast to represent - what the Church always has taught and has already represented in the original calendar. For example, the Church is criticised for not emphasising the importance of creation and the environment, and a feast called 'creationmas' or 'environmentmas' has been suggested - completely duplicating the traditional feast of Lammas that 'ordinary time' has suppressed.

I wrote these prayers for my own use because I wanted to rediscover for myself the whole width of Christian spirituality. So I have scrapped 'ordinary time'; I have reinstated the two great forgotten feasts of Lammas and Michaelmas; I have provided prayers appropriate - within my obvious limitations - to the seasons and to the weeks within the seasons.

The seasons therefore become:

Advent - preparing for Jesus' coming

Christmastide - celebrating Jesus' incarnation and teaching

Lent - preparing for Jesus' death and resurrection

Eastertide - celebrating Jesus' resurrection and glory

Whitsuntide - celebrating the Holy Spirit

Lammastide - celebrating creation and our dependence on it

Michaelmastide - celebrating love, judgement and eternity

The weeks I have structured in the rhythm suggested by the Iona Community's worship; namely :

Sunday: themed on Welcome, prayer focussed on Adoration

Monday: themed on Justice & Peace, prayer focussed on the World

Tuesday: themed on Healing, prayer focussed on Thanksgiving

Wednesday: themed on Pilgrimage, prayer focussed on Confession

Thursday: themed on Commitment, prayer focussed on Commitment

Friday: themed on Celebration, prayer focussed on Celebration

Saturday: themed on Mission, prayer focussed on our Neighbour

I have labelled each week with the Sunday it starts with: so for instance the prayer for the Second Sunday in Advent should be used for every day from the Second Sunday in Advent to the Second Saturday in Advent inclusive. Where a season begins with a particular day rather than a particular Sunday, I have labelled the first week with that day: so the first Sunday in Christmastide is labelled Christmas Day.

In each season, some weeks are incomplete: for instance, Christmastide will usually begin with part of a week, and always end with part of a week. If a season begins with part of a week, then on the first day of the season use the material as if that week had been

complete: so the first few days of Christmastide will use the material for Christmas Day.

The variation in the date of Easter and in the day of the week of Christmas means that some prayers will hardly ever be used. Feel free to swap them for others that have become overused.

As to form: the prayers for the week and the season tend to use the collect form; an invocation that makes a statement about God, a statement of the prayer, and a reason for the statement. As such, they often feel a little old-fashioned. The others are freer in form, and tend to blur the line between prayer and meditation. Several of them use structures from prayers in the Iona Worship Book, and one or two even have obvious quotations from there - in the prayers of confession, especially.

Otherwise the prayers are intended to be all original, but it is impossible to be certain that old memories have not crept out pretending to originality; if this has happened, please accept my deep apology, understand that it was not deliberate, and tell me so that I can change the offending item.

The sentences are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, which is of course copyright.

I am not telling you how to use this material, but I am telling you how I use it: each day I begin with the sentence for the season, then I turn to the sentence and fixed prayer for the day - those are in the 'All Years' section. Then I turn back and use the prayer for the week in the season, the prayer for the weekday in the season, read a Bible passage and a Psalm, pray silently, and finally use the closing prayer and sentence for the season.

Though actually I've written an app to do all this for me.

Use this as suits you, therefore, not as suits me.