

## Sermon

Yesterday [25<sup>th</sup> March] was New Year's Day! At least for over 1,000 years it was! How did this come about and why is it important?<sup>i</sup>

Fairly early in the Christian Era the Church celebrated the birth of Jesus on 25<sup>th</sup> December, but it was hundreds of years later our way of counting the years from the birth of Jesus came about.

It happened because of a monk called **Dionysius** [Dionisius]. Now Dionysius was a very common name equivalent to our Denis, so he called himself Dionysius Exiguus [Dionisius Exijius] – which means “very small” or “insignificant” – so we can quite properly call him “Denis the Little”.

Denis was a very clever monk who came to Rome in about 500 AD and he proposed the idea of a new calendar. To him the most important date in the year was not Christmas Day – celebrating the birthday of Jesus – but because life begins at conception rather than at birth, the most important day was nine months before Christmas: the Feast of the Annunciation – 25<sup>th</sup> March. People saw the sense of what Denis said and for next 1,000 years the Church counted 25<sup>th</sup> March as New Year's Day. Not until 1582 it was put back to 1<sup>st</sup> January.

The other thing Denis the Little did was to calculate the years differently. For centuries the Romans calculated the year from when the city of Rome was supposedly founded in what we would now say was 751 BC.

Or by way of alternative they calculated the year from the date in 284 AD when the Roman Emperor Diocletian started to rule. [Diocletian was cruel tyrant who believed he was better than all the Emperors who had gone before him so he changed the calendar and made the year in which he became emperor year number 1.]

So when Denis the Little came along he said that the foundation of Rome is not the most important event in the history of the world. Of even less importance in his view was the year that Diocletian proclaimed himself as Lord of all the world.

**Dennis said that the most important event was when Jesus was proclaimed Lord** and that it was not his crucifixion, or his resurrection but when he came to earth for our salvation. So Denis calculated his calendar from the day of the conception on Jesus on 25<sup>th</sup> March in year 1 AD [anno Domini – the year of our Lord].

Of course, he got his mathematics wrong! But that doesn't matter! We now know that Jesus was born before the year 4 BC [Because Herod who was king at the time of the birth of Jesus died in 4 BC.] And it's highly unlikely that the conception of Jesus took place on 25<sup>th</sup> March!

**But we can say that Denis had the right idea.**

The date when a city of stone and bricks is founded is not ultimately important. The date when a king starts to reign is not really important. **What is important is this: “Who is in charge of the world?” The answer – Jesus is Lord; Jesus is the ruler!**

That's why the statement of faith that binds Christians together throughout history and across the world is the phrase, **"Jesus Christ is Lord"**. He is the one in control! St Paul says that this is the earliest Christian confession of faith [Romans 10.9; 1 Corinthians 12.3]. We, here today, are part of "the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" because we hold onto this confession of faith, **"Jesus Christ is Lord"**.

Denis had the right idea.

This week the two parishes of Christ Church Queanbeyan and Karabar – South Queanbeyan – come together as one. So in the sermons over the past few weeks we have been thinking about the Shape of this New Ministry Area. Not it's geography; but what might make it work as a worshipping and ministering community to the glory of God.

To help our thinking we've been looking at **the four marks of the church as "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic"** and we've simplified this into four arrows.<sup>ii</sup>

**Jesus must always be the centre and focus of our worship, ministry and mission. But then there are four journeys in four directions:**

1. We make a journey **IN** through deepening our connection to one another and strengthening our friendship with Jesus. We are **ONE** in love for each other and **ONE** in love for God. **ONE** in our working

together across the new ministry area. We need to be bound together **IN** an ever-deepening love for one another and for our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. We make a journey **UP** as we grow upwards in Christian maturity. We are forgiven and saved in order to grow up as a **HOLY** people. **"God loves us just as we are – but God loves us too much to let us remain that way!"** So in this new ministry area there will be a strong emphasis on both Word and Sacrament so that as we practise works of love and as we pray we will **"grow up"** as Christians.
3. We make another journey so that we become more and more aware **OF** the whole Church. In the creed we are reminded that we are part of the **CATHOLIC** Church: not Roman Catholic, but **CATHOLIC**. It means we belong to; we are **"OF"** the church throughout history and across the world. We are all linked by the single confession of faith: "Jesus Christ is Lord".
4. Then we make the journey **OUT** because the Church is **APOSTOLIC**: **sent out** by God to share the Good News of forgiveness, hope and healing with people in a world that has lost its way. Our God is a Missionary God so we take part in that mission and go **OUT** to others in love.

So those four journeys: "IN, UP, OF and OUT".

**IN** – through unity with one another and our Lord we are **ONE**;

UP – through growth in Christian life and maturity we are HOLY;

OF – through awareness of our brothers and sisters we are CATHOLIC;

OUT – as a missionary church sent out by God we are APOSTOLIC.

Today I want us to think for just a few minutes about the great truth that **we are part OF the Catholic Church**. I want us today to become more aware **OF** the whole Church.

Our Gospel reading points us in this direction. Jesus said, *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”* [John 3.14] (Whenever Jesus says “Son of Man” he is talking about himself.) On another occasion Jesus expands this by saying, *“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”* [John 12.32] By this Jesus told his followers how he would die.

When Jesus died on the cross he stretched out his arms to welcome people of all time and every race. The Cross of Jesus stands like a great sign over our world. It stretches upwards – through all history; and outwards to encompass the whole world.

Today – though we are only a few people here – we are part of the Catholic Church that goes back to the time of the apostles; outwards to join with Christians in every

nation; and onwards to encompass all believers until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again in glory.

Just think of that. We are bound together with people like Denis the Little, St Francis of Assisi; with the great Celtic saints of England; with the pioneer missionaries of Africa or South America. We are bound together with all people who worship God today: in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestant Churches. We are bound together with the 17 million Anglican Christians in Nigeria – where so many of them suffer through the AIDS epidemic. These are just examples, but as St Paul says, *“All one in Christ Jesus.”* [Galatians 3.28]

This is not because of any merit in ourselves, but only because we trust in Jesus. We heard those words of St Paul in our Epistle reading: *“By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – so that no one may boast.”* He continues, *“We are what God has made us.”* [Ephesians 2.9] **We belong to one another.**

We can recognise this unity in very practical ways.

**Firstly through supporting missions in other places.** We are here today because people have travelled across the world to tell us the good news of God’s love: Richard Johnson the Chaplain to the First Fleet; Bishop Broughton the first Bishop of Australia, and many, many others. So we too look beyond our new ministry area and support missions across the world. For example, through the church organisation “Compassion” Karabar supports a sponsored

child in Uganda and we will be continuing to support this and other mission organisations.

**Secondly we recognise this unity by working with other churches in our ministry area.** We could not run the St Benedict's Day Centre unless we worked together with the Roman Catholic and Baptist churches. The Bargain Hunter depends on people of many churches as does Mary's Place for homeless people. We need each other across the churches.

**Finally** – and very practically. Go back to Denis the Little. **Can you say with him and truly believe that ancient Christian Creed, “Jesus Christ is Lord”?** “For me he is the person who is number one.”

Denis put him at the centre of time for all the world. Do I put Jesus at the very centre of my time and of my life?

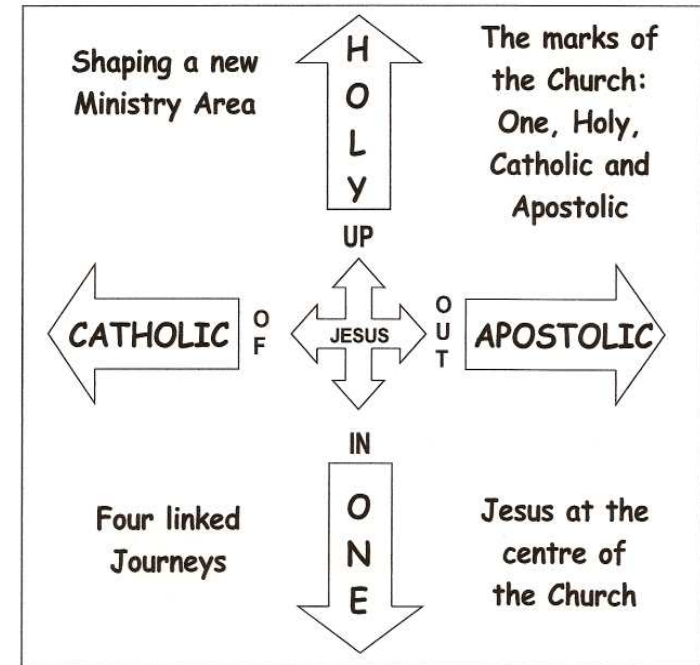
Remember the words of the Gospel. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son – the Lord Jesus Christ, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” [John 3.16]

This is the faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. So let each of us ask ourselves the question, “Is it indeed truly, honestly and sincerely my faith as well?” Can I say in my heart, “Jesus is my Lord”?

Let us pray:

**Almighty God,  
we know that you have made us for yourself, and  
our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.**

**Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose  
to confess our faith and  
live for your praise and glory,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**



<sup>i</sup> See NT Wright *The Myth of the Millennium* 1999

<sup>ii</sup> See *Mission-Shaped Church* Church House Publishing 2004 p 96