

The Communion of the Saints

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 June 2017

Preacher: Rev Andrew Coghill

[0 : 00] Now in recent weeks we've been looking at the biblical basis behind the next section of our church's confession of faith. And this morning we look at chapter, or the basis behind chapter 26 in the confession of faith, which is entitled of the communion of saints.

The communion of saints. And for that, there's a number of texts you could take. I've chosen to take these two verses in Hebrews 10, 24 and 25.

Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the man of the sun is, but exhorting one another and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.

In other words, we have an investment in one another. It's not just a case of, oh, we're meant to love each other and uphold each other and so on. But there's actually an investment of ourselves in each other and in Christ.

It's not simply a belonging as a sense of part of the body. The communion of saints is more than that. It's kind of deeper than that because it's directly linking us with Christ himself and with one another.

[1 : 16] There's both the vertical and the horizontal. And the vertical in one sense also takes in. The communion of saints also takes in. Those who have been believers before us but are no longer on earth.

Sometimes that's the only sense in which some people in some parts of the church think in terms of the communion of saints. Oh, well, it's the faithful departed. It's those who are in heaven now. And we are sort of one with them because we're on earth and they're in heaven but we're still united in Christ.

That's true as far as it goes. But that's really just sort of, well, that's what we think about. We think of them up here and we think of them ourselves down here.

But the communion of saints in terms of our earthly reality, our earthly existence involves an interconnection, an investment of us in one another and in Christ.

If we're not in Christ, then we're not connected really to one another. We've no reason to. We might say, you know, that, for example, because most of us here are, well, from the same island, so we're in the same community, so we might have reasons why we might come together on certain occasions.

[2 : 26] And you might say, well, church is just one of them. That's what brings us together. But in the communion of saints, it means that we are directly part of a body of, say, our brothers and sisters meeting in Ethiopia this morning or in Kenya or in Malaysia or China or whatever.

And we never met them. And we don't know them. We wouldn't understand if they spoke to us a different language. Their skin colors are different. Their traditions, their culture is different. But we're still part of them.

In the same way as your fingernail is different from your ear and your arm is different from your torso and so on. They're different. They're completely different. And your hair is a different color from perhaps your skin or whatever.

But it doesn't matter because it's part of the one body and the head is Christ. And what the communion of saints does is it unites together those who would otherwise be completely disparate. Those who would have nothing really to do with each other. But they have this communion and this belonging because they are in Christ. Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the man of some is.

[3 : 40] If we are to be strengthened in this, then it doesn't just strengthen the bond of the local body. There is that sense to it in the sense that any team, let's say if it's a sporting team, if they only

meet up for training, say once every two months.

And they're up against another team that is meeting every day or at least every week. And they're training together and they're working together and they're cooperating together. The ones who are gelled together, who are focused on what they have to do and coming together regularly, they will be an infinitely stronger team than the ones who just mosey in now and then every couple of months or whatever.

And it's the same with the body of Christ. If we are going to be spiritually effective, if we're going to have that power not only from Christ but in one another, that gelling force together, that strength together, then we cannot forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

We've got to meet up, as it were, in spiritual terms, meet up for training. We're going to meet up for training on a regular basis. We're going to strengthen one another. We're going to know how each other works.

We're going to pray for each other. So that when a battle comes, and the likelihood is battles will not come when we're all together and all strong. They'll come against us individually during the week in an unexpected place and circumstance.

[5 : 02] Then the fact that we have been in training, the fact that we have been gelled with one another and have been upheld by one another's prayers, will be part of what sustains and supports us.

Now, as I say, communion of saints joins together people in Christ who would otherwise have no connection with each other. Because, okay, the body of Christ is like a family.

But there's the sense in which people who could not possibly meet up still manage to be part of the same body, the same belonging.

Most of you know that in our own family we've got a couple of weddings coming up later on this year. Now, that will bring into connection families who had never met before, had never met and would have no reason to meet being in completely different parts of the country, except that two young people from these completely separate families have got to know each other, come to love each other, want to commit to each other.

Which means that because they are doing that, there is now going to be a loft, legal, and family, and if there's any subsequent generations and children, a blood connection also, between families who previously had nothing to do with each other and would never have met and would never have encountered each other, but now are interconnected, now are relatives, now are joined together, going to be joined together in that sense.

[6 : 33] Because of that unity that's brought them together, because of that love which is bound them together in two young people who just happen to be members of completely different families.

And that brings together two completely separate families. They might not always be in each other's pockets. They might not always be meeting up, but there is that connectedness.

They know about each other. They'll be in touch with each other. They'll be connected to each other at future family events. They will be coming together. And they would never otherwise have met.

And in the same way, with the communion of saints, not only is it the case of, you know, in glory just now, there's Abraham and Moses and Columba and all these other, the apostles and all the other people who have followed Christ and believed and trusted in him from all the ages, we would never have a chance to meet.

But we will meet in glory. And they are connected to us as part of this belonging together, this family of the Lord's people. This communion of the saints, it's deeper than just being part of the body.

It's deeper than just having, happening to know each other or know other people. It's a belonging in unity and yet a distinction amongst them.

[7 : 52] We mentioned with the children how, you know, in our own country, the state, the United Kingdom, there's these four nations. There's Scotland and England and Ireland and Wales. And we're each distinct and jealous of our distinctions in many ways and yet still part of the same political state in that sense.

Now, sometimes nations break off from each other. That may still be an open question. Sometimes they come together in ways they hadn't done before. But the point is that there is distinction within unity.

And the same is true of the communion of saints. And in either recognising this and helping one another and strengthening one another or not, Jesus says that we recognise, strengthen and help

him or not, as the case may be.

Remember Matthew 25. Remember that always slightly chilling account of the separation of the sheep and the goats. And I don't know why it should always be chilling, but it always is to me anyway.

I never really get to think, oh, that's okay, because I'm one of the sheep, so I must be okay. No, we look at all that we haven't done. And we see that we ought to be amongst the goats. But what Jesus says, remember, is, He says to those in His right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, and help the kingdom prepare for you from the foundation of the world.

[9 : 14] I was in hunger, ye gave me meat. I was thirsty, ye gave me drink. I was a stranger, ye took me in. Naked, ye clothed me. I was sick, and ye visited me. I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer and say, Lord, when saw we thee in hunger, and fed thee, or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in, or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sicker, and imprisoned, and came unto thee?

And the king shall answer and say unto them, Finally I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me. And then when those on the other side are condemned, it's because they ignore those who were in need.

And they didn't act, and they didn't do, although they ought to have, being part of the body, part of the communion. Now this isn't just sort of, oh, well, this is deep sort of Bible stuff, it doesn't really apply to my life.

Well, actually it does. It means that when, for example, we get the leaflets or the prayer notes for the missionaries, it's not just a piece of paper in our hand to go on the shelf, or to go on the table, or in the drawer, or whatever.

[10 : 22] It's to be used, because prayer makes a difference. It's the steadfast global stuff that some will be able to get today. It means that when we're praying for the persecuted church, or the Barnabas family, which when that comes out, when you get that, it's part of your interconnectedness with the church at large, with the body, with the communion of saints.

What happens to them, in a sense, happens to us. Their persecution may well be a precursor to our persecution in this country. And we all know how anti-Christian this country is getting.

So, I mean, what happens to them happens to us. They suffer, we feel it. They have a triumph, we rejoice. We pray for them, we uphold them as much as we can, and we give to them as we're able. That's part of our duty. It's part of the duty of saints in the communion of saints. It means that when we get our envelopes, whether today or at whatever point during the week, we get them.

It's not just, oh, this is an envelope we fill, it's more money, and the church, and so on. It's not about giving simply to the church in this sense of the church. Apart from the sense of giving to the Lord, which ought to be our first priority, our connectedness to the head, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 36] And as much as he did it unto one of the least of these, my servants, my brethren, he did it to me. But also it means that, you know, everything that is raised by the WFM, everything that is given into the church funds, that's the means by which our deacons court is able to give to, say, a church plant in Burgheth or in Sterling or in Dundee.

That's the means by which other Christians who are slogging away to bring a gospel witness in places where maybe it hasn't been for ages, or where there isn't a set established church and congregation in the area for people to come to.

They're bringing this good news to people who wouldn't otherwise have it, and we're able to help them do that. That's where so much of your giving, your money goes, as well as maintaining the witness and the church throughout the country.

It's part, we're all connected to each other. When the envelopes come, it's not just an envelope, it's not just a piece of paper, it's not just, oh, it's money to be given, oh, it's another thing that the church is wanting money for.

It's about being part of the body. It's about being the body of Christ. It's about the communion of saints. This is real. It's not just theoretical.

[12 : 50] It's not just the Bible long ago. It's our daily lives and the daily lives of ordinary believers throughout the world, some of whom are suffering fearful persecution, which we can only imagine, or rather perhaps we're not rather imagine.

What we have, we have as part of our interconnectedness with Christ. That's what we read about there in Matthew 25. It's also what Jesus prays about in John 17.

You know, we're used to hearing about this prayer of Jesus for his apostles and for unity and so on, but what does it actually mean? Sometimes it is taken by those of an ecumenical persuasion.

Oh, Jesus prays that we all may be one. And that means cobbling together all these different denominations that we never otherwise agree. So how do we get them to agree? Well, we just ignore all our statements of faith and we ignore all our confessions of faith.

And we just say, well, we'll give people liberty of conscience. So they don't have to believe this and they don't have to believe that and they don't have to believe the next thing. But as long as we're all one, that's what matters. Well, that's not a spiritual or God-honoring unity.

[14:00] Just by ceasing to believe whatever it is that you're meant to believe. Jesus prays in John 17. He says, neither pray I for these alone, not just for his apostles there on the spot, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.

And he doesn't just mean the 11 or the 12 apostles. He means those who then through their witness will come to believe afterwards. The likes of, say, Timothy because of the message of Paul. Paul because of the encouragement of Barnabas brought within the body. Barnabas who is brought within the number of the disciples after he hears the gospel preached at Pentacost. And so after Timothy and Titus and all the others that come on and those then who bring the gospel to say Western Turkey and then to Greece.

And then from Greece taken into the rest of Europe and then from the rest of Europe into France and then to Ireland and then to Scotland and so on. And we who receive Jesus' prayer for each link in the chain.

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word. That they all may be one, the communion of saints. As thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.

[15:13] That the world may believe that thou hast sent me one in Christ. One of the reasons why in the early church so many people believed the truth of what the Christians were teaching was because they loved each other.

See how these Christians loved one another was a great cry of the pagans. Because they upheld, supported, strengthened each other. The glory which thou gavest me, I have given them.

That they may be one even as we are one. I in them, Christ in the midst of his people. And thou, the Father, in me, in the Son. That they may be made perfect in one.

And that the world may know that thou hast sent me, Jesus. And hast loved them, the believers, as thou hast loved me. In verse 26.

I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it. That the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. You see what Jesus is actually praying to you.

[16:11] That not only will he continue to have the love of the Father and his love for the Father. But just as the Father is in him and he in the Father. So his people would be in him, in Christ.

This interconnectedness. And that translates into practical action. Translates into prayer support. It translates into giving. It translates into sharing or upholding each other.

But as we do that, Christ is still God. We do not, by the long term, we can't say, oh well, I'm connected with Christ.

So I'm really God too. I want that. I've got his kind of divine authority too. I've got his kind of power as well. No, you don't. It's like sharing your food at the table.

You can give somebody a wee taste of yours. And they can give you a wee taste of theirs. But it's still their plate of food. It's still your plate of food. You know, one of the most glorious things Jesus offers his people is what he offers to the church of Laodicea.

[17:11] And by implication, the other churches. Which, you know, the Laodiceans were the lukewarm church. The ones that really had nothing going for them. But he says, to him that overcometh.

Revelation 3, verse 21. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne. Even as I also overcame and sat down with my father in his throne.

Now, if you stop and think. We've looked at this in the past. We've preached sermons on it and so on in the past. But sitting with Christ in his throne. It's, you know, it's almost blasphemous if it was coming from anyone but him.

We just wouldn't believe it. If somebody said, now, you know, you get the seat of Jesus in his throne. Said, no, no, no. That's not appropriate. That would be too bad. That would be too presumptuous. No, it's Jesus who is saying it.

And it's Jesus who is inviting. Sit with him in his throne. But, whilst that is unbelievably, mind-blowingly glorious. He doesn't say, and it will be your throne too.

[18:12] We'll share it. We'll be equal. You know, we'll all be the same level. I'll be as low as you. You'll be as high as me. Instead of being my throne, it'll be our throne.

He doesn't say that. He says, you'll sit with me in my throne. But it's still my throne. He is still God. He is still the Savior. He is still Christ.

We are still his children, his followers, his believers. To whom he gives immense, mind-blowing privilege and glory. But it is still his to give.

And this is part of the communion of saints, you see. It's that we don't just all become but one big smush. And we're all just the same as each other. No, rather there is this wondrous unity in the diversity.

And there is the interconnectedness and yet the personal distinctiveness with each one. So, likewise, what you have, the things you have are your own.

[19:15] But what you do with them reflects how you feel and how you think about the Lord and about his people. Way back in the early church, in the Acts of the Apostles, at the end of chapter 4, we read of how, you know, people began to sell their land and their properties.

And neither was there any among them that lacked. Nobody went hungry. But as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them and brought the prices of the things that were sold and laid them down at the apostles' feet.

And distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And then we read in chapter 5, But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold the possession and kept back part of the price.

His wife, also being privy to it, brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost and to keep back part of the price of the land?

While it remained, was it not thine own? Just because you've become a Christian doesn't mean you lose all your property rights. Doesn't mean you have to hand in all your possessions.

[20:26] While it remained, it was still your own. And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

Even when you've sold the land, even when you brought it. If you'd even said, you know, look, here's half the price of the land we've sold. We need the other because we've got debts and we've got bills or whatever.

But, you know, this is half of it and we're giving it to you. But clearly what they did was, they saw that other people were selling homes and fields and everything and laying the money down at the apostles' feet.

And this was all ooh and ah and how great they were and how they're sacrificed. They wanted some of that spiritual cue dots. They wanted people to ooh and ah them. They wanted the reputation of godliness, but they still didn't want to part with all their money.

So they sold their field, they sold their land, but they kept some of it. But they pretended they were giving it all to the apostles. It was the lie which cost them their lives.

[21:31] Not the keeping back part of the funds. It was the lie that cost them. Because they pretended they were giving all, but in fact they were giving only part.

They wanted people to think they were giving all, but in fact they were keeping some, perhaps much, perhaps most for all we know, perhaps only a portion of the money for themselves.

It wasn't wrong for them to keep it to themselves. It was wrong for them to lie and to pretend they were giving all as others were doing. But it was their own property.

And it was their own money. And as Peter said, it would continue to be their own money, even after they sold the field of whatever they did with it. They had lives not to men, but to God.

But you see, here's the point. The point is that though they were believers or claiming to be believers, what they had still belonged to them. They could put it into the communal pot or they could keep it back.

[22 : 35] It was their right. None of the apostles, nobody was saying, now that you're a Christian, give up all your possessions. You should forget it all. You should put it all in the communal pot and you should now profess true poverty.

That's, of course, what the monasteries did of old. People had to give up all their possessions into the monastery and they themselves then had professed poverty. They had nothing. The monastery owned everything.

That just meant the monastery got very, very rich. And as more and more people gave to these religious houses and they believed they were buying well-being for their soul by doing so, then the monasteries got rich, people got poorer, and corruption set in in the church.

That's how it began. That's how it happened. It's not because the things of this world have shone in some people's eyes the promise of glory. But it was theirs to give or theirs to keep.

And so it is with everything that we have. The Lord gives it into your hand and it is yours to save or it is yours to keep or it is yours to share. The Lord is the one who alone can give you discretion and direction.

[23 : 41] What we do, we do for love of the brethren, love of our brothers and sisters here and throughout the world because we are interconnected with them.

And we are also interconnected, as we mentioned, with those who have gone before us. Now, it's not a sense of which, ooh, they're kind of the prayers of the saints like Roman Catholicism would go by.

We don't pray for those who have departed. We don't ask them to intercede for us. We go to Christ. He who is at the right hand of glory. He was God the Son. He's far more powerful than his children, his believers, who have trusted in him.

There's no point praying to them when you can go straight to the king. But there is a sense in which those who have gone before us see and behold the witness and the walk of those still here.

And the reason we say that is because that's what the Bible says, Hebrews 12. Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight of the sin which doth so easily beset us.

[24 : 48] And let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking not to the cloud of witnesses, but looking unto Jesus, the author, the originator, the initiator, and the finisher, the completer, the perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

You see, all the saints who have gone before us, they are there as part of the cloud of witness. They are part of the saints in glory, that they're with the Lord in heaven, they're beholding the witness, the walk, the race of those who are still here.

And I always like to think of them as if we're kind of cheering us on from heaven, from glory. Maybe they don't think of us down here, but they would suggest in Scripture that they do.

We're surrounded by the testimony, by the witness of those who have gone before us. This cloud of witnesses who are with the Lord in glory, we are connected with them.

We are part of that communion, part of that body. This is one reason, of course, why the Lord's Supper is something that is referred to as a communion. It is one body which is symbolically broken, as the one loaf is broken up and distributed.

[26 : 11] We each partake of our own little piece. We each take our own little sip of the one cup. And it is one cup and it is one loaf, but we each partake our own piece in this communion, this sharing in the body of Christ, in the blood of Christ.

We are interconnected, we who would never otherwise be so. Why? What brings people from different sides of the country or the world together in fellowship?

It is the love of Christ. What takes a missionary to the far corners of the world? It is the love of Christ. What takes somebody from one side of the country to another to become part of a different body or a different congregation or group of people which they never knew before?

The love of Christ. And where he leads and where he places us and those he brings us into fellowship and communion with. We are part of that one body.

Though each distinct. Though each personal. Though each one precious. And identifiable as an individual yet precious to Christ.

[27 : 24] And part of the one. How then do we strengthen this body? The same way as a team strengthens itself. They meet together.

They work together. They train together. And for us, we meet together. We pray together. We work together. We do whatever we can to strengthen one another.

Here and one another also throughout the world. Let us consider one another. Let us think about each other. How can we be of help to each other?

How can we strengthen each other? When the team does well, every individual on the team shares in their glory. Shares in their victory. If you've got a brilliant goalie, then it helps the rest of the team. If you've got a fantastic striker, it helps the rest of the team. If you've got a great midfielder, it helps the rest of the team. We are interconnected in that which we would never otherwise have been part of.

[28 : 21] This one body. And it's not simply that which we choose in a sense. It's that he chooses us. Christ chooses us to belong to his body.

There's more tied up in this than simply our individual feelings. Our whole life is bound up with it. Again, if you'll forgive the constant reference to sporting analogies, it's not so much simply like, oh, this is a team you support.

Oh, this is your favourites or whatever. It's more like if you happen to be a child, a child whose father, say, is the manager of a club. And he moves from one club to a different club.

And when he moves to that other club, that club now becomes his life and your life. If the club does well, then your home is much better off because his income goes up, they climb up the league, they win trophies.

More and more resources flow into the family. The family does better. Even if this team wasn't your favourites, even if these weren't the ones, your boyhood favourites are the one you grew up supporting, your father, your family is bound up now in not just what your favourite team happens to be.

[29 : 32] But you need the whole team to do well. You need the whole club to do well. Your whole family is involved in this. Your livelihood is built up with this. If they do well, if he does well, everybody benefits.

It's not just now about who you like to watch in telly or who you like to buy the programmes for or wave a scarf for. This is your life. This is your whole being is bound up with it.

Now your heavenly father has taken on a responsibility in which we initially have no say. We are little children.

And as part of his family, when he is involved in this fight, we become part of it. When he and his team, his church, his body does well, when they triumph, we share in that triumph.

When they are attacked, we feel the pain. We feel a part of it. So we belong in this communion of saints. Our life is bound up with this.

[30 : 33] Our livelihood is bound up with it. It affects what we do with our money. It affects where we focus our energies and our attention and the things we try to help.

It ought to be part of the single greatest priority in our lives. The Lord, of course, should be the ultimate priority. But the body of Christ, the communion of saints, that is part of that priority.

And it ought to be the greatest priority. It ought to mean more to us than any other particular tastes or preferences, whether sporting or worldly or the idols of this world or political parties or whatever.

The Lord and his people ought to be first and foremost. Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some lives, but exhorting one another.

And so much the more as ye see the day approaching. It is not that love that we have here on this earth.

[31 : 42] It is a human feeling that we all tend to think of ourselves as much younger than we are. We all tend to think that we are still in our sort of twenties or maybe teens or whatever.

And in fact, so many decades have passed. We just don't realize it. And so few decades are ahead of us. Even if we live a long and full and complete life and nothing cuts us short, the time is so quickly slipping away.

It isn't long that we have to make an impact, to make a difference, to choose the decisions that really matter and to make the input that we can that at the end of our life we won't have to say, you know, what did my life amount to?

If you're in Christ, you don't have to worry about the answer to that question. If you're in Christ and part of the communion of saints, you'll belong to the greatest and most important, most

difference-making body in the entire history of the world.

If you were in Christ, you know that here is just the training ground. It's not the big match. It's not the big game. It's certainly not the winner's podium.

[32 : 58] This is the trial. This is the training. This is brief. And this will pass before you know it. Don't make the training match as though it were the cup final.

Don't pretend that this were the big deal and all there is because this is as nothing yet and it will melt away. Let us consider one another to provoke and to love and to good works, that is, works done by faith which will make a difference, which will help one another, particularly our fellow believers, not forsaking the assembly of ourselves together.

It does matter whether we meet together or not. It does matter whether we gather for prayer. It does matter whether we gather for worship. It's the manner of some is. Exhorting one another and so much the more as we see the day approaching because it is.

It is approaching. And our cry as we see the day approaching, our prayer as we see the day approaching, ought not to be, oh no, how quickly it's coming.

Oh no, that's the end of the line. Our prayer ought to be, even so, come Lord Jesus, come quickly. We ought to be enthusiastic about that day approaching because it means more of Christ.

[34 : 14] It means more of glory, more of life, more of the communion of saints, if indeed we are part of it. But the invitation from Christ is there for all who would come.

Whosoever would, let him take the water of life freely and let us consider one another to provoke and to love and to good work.