

**Two or three**

*Matthew 18:15-20*

People have been kind enough to ask if I had a good holiday. I certainly needed the rest. I always remember the late, great Norma Ronald DCS, our pastoral assistant here a few years ago, looking at me with a critical but friendly eye at certain times of the year, and saying, "So when's your next holiday?" Clearly my tiredness and ratty-ness was showing more than usual. So, I have had a good rest, saw some friends, but to be honest the weather was terrible, and there still wasn't a huge amount to do with so much being closed.

When it came to Sundays, I didn't want to go to churches where I might take a space from a regular attender, and of course so many churches are still closed, not being as fortunate as we are to be open.

I ended up watching some live-stream services. What a pity the cameras weren't playing over the congregation so I could see how many of you were coming and not skiving off when the cat was away!

It is odd watching worship on your own, but in a few moments, you are drawn in. The words, the music, and the sense that you are not alone. Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them."

- Is it easier to worship God in a crowd, or in smaller numbers?

Well, it depends. Worship in the midst of a congregation, with strong singing, and that powerful sense of praying together and sharing the experience together is tremendous. I think of worship at the opening of each day of the General Assembly. I think of services here when there is a baptism. I think of those other services when words and music and that powerful community of faith unites and God's presence moving and alighting and bringing together. Yes, that can be inspiring, uplifting, spirit-transforming.

- In these last months, what has it been like to worship God at home, online, or in Church?

But Jesus said also, “Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.” Worshipping in a large congregation is one thing but the smaller experience, the more intimate experience of worship has its own unique power too. Where there are no distractions, where things seem to slow down and the nearness of God is overwhelming in a more intimate way. I think of the evening services we used to hold in this sanctuary, in the choir area, with the night falling, and those beautiful evening hymns, and God’s gentleness calming and stilling. I think of home communions, where usually there are just two people, on either side of a little table. And bread and wine is shared, and the familiar words are said, and it is so quiet you can hear each other breathe, and in truth it is so quiet you can hear God breathe.

Someone wrote to me last week about coming back to Church for the first time since lockdown, and thinking it would be bizarre, but in fact finding it tender and comforting. People sitting apart and distinct, but somehow, without the numbers, feeling strangely more connected, with the words and the music holding people together. Jesus in the midst.

I found, and I wonder if others are finding, that sitting at home, once you get passed the oddness of looking at a screen, that the steadiness of the worship, and the familiarity of the space, and the recognised voice, and the glory of the music, paused the isolation even if only for a moment, and connection was made.

Is that what worship is? Well, yes, partly it is: it is about connection. It is about connection to God, it is about connection to God’s people; and when that cannot be physical, being together in the same building, it can be spiritual, being together in the same time, listening to the same words, sharing the same experience. Not only to those who are here in this church today, but also to those of you who are watching live online, and those who will watch the service later on in the week, we are together. The mystery of God’s love binds, weaves, holds us together, and God’s blessing is upon us and around us and within us. “Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.”

- God is present now; what does that make you think, feel and believe?

The presence of God is one of the key elements of our Christian faith. In a world where there is loneliness and separation and isolation, the presence of God becomes and remains tremendously important. Let's get theological and fancy and call it incarnation. God in the flesh, God in the person of Jesus, God in the movement of the Holy Spirit, at work in first century Palestine, at work in twenty-first century Morningside. "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them."

When Jesus said this, there is a twofold background. "In Judaism, ten males were required to be present for corporate worship; here, the number is foreshortened to two or three. Such is enough to make the prayer of the community valid. There was also a familiar Jewish statement which said: 'When two sit together and engage themselves with the words of the Torah (God's Law and teachings) the *Shekinah* (the Spirit and presence of God) is in their midst.' Jesus speaks from His Jewish tradition. He will be present wherever and whenever His followers and friends call on His Name, however few in number they may be.<sup>i</sup> That is wonderful.

"The Church is not fundamentally an institution or a denomination, but any place where two or three or more people live together in mutual interdependence under Christ. This requires casting off the yoke of individualism, which results in alienation, loneliness, anxiety and distrust, into a profound trust of and commitment to people different from ourselves."<sup>ii</sup>

As we emerge from Lockdown, with all the tensions and anxieties and nervousness, whether we have been with family, or whether we have been on our own; whether we have connected through the Internet or telephone, or with neighbours or with no-one, the Church of Jesus has remained. The congregation of God's people, apart or together, has found to its surprise and everlasting comfort, that, "Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them."

And when Jesus is with us, when Jesus is in the midst of us, He helps, somehow, with our loneliness, with our sadness, with our fears, with our hope. Jesus reaches out a hand now, to place on your shoulder, on your head, on your heart, to give you reassurance, comfort, and peace.

I do not know how I could have got through these last months without this truth about Jesus. He was always there, whether I knew it or not. And if that is true for me, I pray it will also be true for you, wherever you are today.

“Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.”

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Leith Fisher, *But I say to You*, pps230-231

<sup>ii</sup> Jin S Kim, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p48*