

Rector's Sermon

6th September 2020

Long ago the great Anglican priest and poet John Donne reminded us that, 'no man is an island, entire unto himself.' And yet in an age of extraordinary advances in communication technology, loneliness and isolation are a major factor in the rise of many mental health issues. More and more we are discovering that even in densely populated cities such as here in London, loneliness is a chronic, debilitating, and shamefully, common condition. This condition has only been exacerbated during this time of pandemic.

Over the last six months we have rediscovered the importance of interdependence over independence, of seeking the flourishing of the other before the flourishing of ourselves. Our desire to follow the Covid protocols are about ensuring the functioning of our National Health Service and protecting our senior citizens and all who have underlying health conditions. So many of you here and watching at home have been seeking out the lonely and distressed and I give thanks to God for the blessing that you have been to so many people in need.

Our experience of Covid 19 has underlined that being completely solitary is contrary to human nature because we are social animals. Introverts as well as extraverts need human companionship. For all human history life has been lived in the context of communities of one sort or another. This, of course, is simply sociology or anthropology. It is a neutral observation, because communities can be good and bad.

The bad is easy to recognize, because the history of humankind is as much as anything a history of war and conflict. We read in the record of the past and see in the news of our day that humans have great difficulty getting along with one another whether it be in the neighbourhood, village, city, state, nation, or world.

As Christians we understand the negative side of community life, and we confess it. Yet we do not give in to the dark side; we make no peace with the powers that divide community and isolate individuals. Further, our faith and commitment presses us to develop the best side of our lives as social creatures.

The primary prayer of Christian faith begins not with 'my', but 'our'. 'Our Father, who art in heaven'. It is a shared prayer for a shared faith. We understand ourselves as part of a family in which we are all sisters and brothers. We recognise that our lives in the context of community must be mutually supportive.

Today's Gospel reminds us of the good we can do and be together, and how we can do it. Jesus says, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' If any group of us will gather, work, act with the Holy Spirit guiding us, with God's spirit intentionally at the heart of what we do, we become much more than simply the collective number of people we are. We find that two becomes more than two, and three becomes more than three. The sum of our individual ideas and resources and abilities becomes much more because of the synergy that God's presence provides. And that synergy is called 'Grace'.

We do gather in Jesus' name. We re-call him to presence with us. And that makes him a part of us and of what we do. That is what we experience at each Eucharist - we in him and he in us. But we don't celebrate Eucharist alone. We celebrate it in community – which is why it is also called Holy Communion.

Ours therefore is a faith of loving, dynamic community, of twos and threes and fours, but never of individuals. We act together so we can help one another and so we can work together in God's name, thereby multiplying our resources and ability to do what God calls us to do. Our community is the very lifeline to the experience of God and to the power of God moving among God's people.

While a private spiritual and prayer life is essential for each of us, it is likely to become dry and turn inward if it is not infused with regular doses of shared worship and connection with others, gathered in Christ's name, and for his sake. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' The gathering, the connectedness, magnifies the Spirit for us and in us and with us.

Today Jesus makes it clear how important we are one to another. Through our link to one another through Christ, there is a power in our community, uniting the values of God to our values on earth. This is how Jesus enables us to use God's power for making healing and life-giving love more effective among God's people.

These last months we have discovered there are many ways to come together, ways that before lockdown we would not have envisaged. It is wonderful that today for the first time we are physically and virtually sharing in the Eucharist service together. Through our online presence we have discovered new ways to minister to one another. Physically present, we have continued to love and serve one another.

In both ways, physically and virtually, we will continue to come together, we will stay together, we will work together as the Body of Christ here at St Margaret's, in our Lord's name, bringing to focus the graceful and transformational presence and love of God and in doing so unleash the power of the Holy Spirit to utterly transform and transfigure our lives and the lives of all God's children in this place and across God's world. Amen.