

JESUS IN OUR MIDST

Matthew 18v20

Some of you are old enough remember the Jamie & Carol Owens event 'Come Together' back in the 1960's and 70's. I remember going along to it as a fairly new Christian at the City Hall in Newcastle. For many of us it represented a dramatic change from our weekly Sunday meetings. It was contemporary, interactive, open to the Holy Spirit and there were new songs like this:

*“He is here, He is here,
He is moving among us.
He is here, here is here,
As we gather in His name.
He is here, He is here,
And He wants to work a wonder,
He is Here, He is here,
As we gather in His name.”*

This song is based on our text, Matthew 18v20. **For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.** The King James Authorised Version is more familiar to many: **For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.**

Starting this morning I want to do a series of messages on the Biblical basis for cell groups. I am kicking off with this text because it is basic to understanding what *cell meetings* are about.

In the Gospels the word “church” is rare, but in Mathew 18 v17 it is on the lips of Jesus. He is preparing His disciples for life in community, not for solitary lives of individual faith. Verses 15-17 are about how to handle relationship difficulties and vv18-20 are primarily about praying together – very helpful as we begin a County Church Week of Prayer today.

But verse 20 has a wider application than gathering for prayer. **For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** These words are relevant whenever we come together. The most important ingredient in the life of the gathered community (the church) will always be Christ's presence; Jesus in the midst. It is this which makes our gatherings unique. Many other people have meetings. There are various kinds of community. But we have Christ in the midst. His Presence among us is the vital life-giving factor whenever we meet. This morning Christ is present.

These words of Jesus are also basic to understanding why we meet each week in cell groups, and the young people come together at 'level x' on Fridays. This is where we experience Christ in the midst. Jesus' words highlight three things for us.

1. We don't need a special building for Jesus to be in our midst.

For where two or three are *gathered together* in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Wherever we gather, He will be in the midst. In the Gospels Jesus did meet with people in the temple & the synagogue; but he did so much more often in everyday settings – in homes, up mountains and hills, in gardens, by a lake, on a lake, walking along a road and even in houses of ill-repute.

Jesus didn't need a special building and He still doesn't, because it is people who are now the special building. Jesus says **Where two or three (people) are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.** This truth is picked up in the rest of the New Testament. *“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?”* (1 Corinthians 3v16) It is believers who are now the holy building. You and me!

As far as Cell life is concerned, He will be present in homes as well as Church centres. He will be present in houses that are less than perfect. He will be present on purely social occasions - at a barbecue, on a walk, at a picnic. He will be present in unbeliever's homes when you gather there for a Cell meeting. He will be with you on the street as you prayer walk your neighbourhood in two's and threes.

2. We don't need a large crowd for Jesus to be in our midst.

For where *two or three* are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Yes, large gatherings are inspiring and we all need them. In fact, when we return home after big Youth events or Christian Conferences where thousands have gathered we can feel unsettled. If only it was like that here every week! But we shouldn't view smaller gatherings as inferior. They are just different. And Jesus is as present with us when we are small as He is when we are a large company.

Even with two or three He will show up. In the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, Israel, there is a model entitled '*Waiting for a Minyan*'. It depicts the interior of a synagogue, with a collection of Jewish men in various poses – e.g. leaning on a pillar, basically - hanging around. Why? They are "Waiting for a Minyan". A Minyan is a quorum for synagogue prayers ie. 10 male worshippers over the age of 13. They cannot begin until they have the full number. But here in Mtth.18v20 it is simply - more than one person; two or three. And not just male - and there are no age restrictions. Just two believers and it becomes an authentic community of prayer and worship.

I think we lose something of the power of this text if we just use it on an evening when the telephone rings before the Cell meeting and five or six give their apologies and only a few people turn up. *“Oh well, where two or three*

are gathered..!" No! This is a glorious promise. Two people or three people! Christ loves the smallest community. He is present. He is in the midst.

It may not be a cell meeting. You may be supping coffee in the kitchen with one other believer while the children play around your feet. Jesus is with you. You may be spending time with a new Christian helping them with the basics of the Christian life. Jesus is with you. You may be having a day walking with a Christian friend and another who is not yet a believer.

In our Week of Prayer too: He will be present in the various homes and at Alan's Studio on Monday as we pray. He will be with us at our prayer lunch and the Saturday Prayer Breakfast. He will be in the midst as we meet in two's to pray – whether as married couples or friends.

On Sundays it is always the Presence of Christ, rather than numbers, that is most important. Yes, we want to see numbers grow because we want more and more people in this County to worship Jesus! But we will not focus on head counts at the expense of making Jesus the focus. We need Jesus in our midst more than we need big numbers.

3. We don't need a clever agenda for Jesus to be in our midst.

For where two or three are gathered together *in my name*, there am I in the midst of them.

Many of us can get a bit fed up with small groups. They easily go stale and we get bored; then we either go along out of loyalty or we don't turn up! That is why so many different kinds of small groups have been tried. So is cell just another system? It can easily be! For me, Bill Beckham, in his book on cell principles 'Second Reformation', puts his finger on the main issue. *"There is only one kind of small group that never goes stale - where Jesus is present; when Christ is in the midst."* When we make Jesus the Agenda, He will be in the midst. If we follow a cell system in a turgid way, bound by its structure, it will feel like a straightjacket. I have seen this happen in some cell groups over the years. Systems are empty if they are not filled with the Presence of Christ.

Don't mishear me. We still need to think clearly about the content of our times together. We still need to plan and delegate. We need variety, so that we don't get in a rut. There are lots of things we want to include over a series of weeks and months when we come together. But on every occasion, we want to encounter Jesus. We need Him in our midst.

So, whenever we meet together we should be thinking: *"We are going to meet with Jesus!" He is going to be present! What will He do this week? What will He say? Will He heal someone or set someone free from some heavy weight? Will he give us the key to some difficulty facing us? Will we receive more of His power or joy or grace?"*

John Wilthew. September 2007.