

Hebrews 9:24-end, Mark 1:14-20

It is great to be back in Church with a gathered congregation we are able worship and sing God's praise together in Celebration of God's love. All the gifts of music and words come together in our praise and prayers, in teaching and Communion.

In our daily lives we can feel isolated but when we come together we know we are part of something bigger. We are part of God's family and we should not neglect meeting together. We are the Body of Christ and are not meant to live in isolation. We meet together to worship the Lord our God who relates to individuals, to families, to communities and to nations.

The essence of the Christian faith is that the Lord our God is a personal God who has made us in His own image, able to relate to Him. He has reached out to us. We cannot find God by our own cleverness, or holiness. But in His great graciousness He has found us. We are invited into a personal relationship with Him, an ongoing and rich encounter with the Living God.

The context of Jesus beginning his ministry in Galilee was not very auspicious. Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had just been put in prison. John had prepared the way for Jesus by warning people to get ready for the coming of God's Kingdom. Jesus was also preaching that God's Kingdom was already close by, at hand, available to those who responded in repentance and faith.

Jesus had already befriended some of John the Baptist's disciples down by the River Jordan where John had been baptizing. We know from John's Gospel that they had already met Jesus by the River Jordan and travelled with Him to Cana in Galilee where He had performed his first miracle of turning water into wine. They had believed in Him. But as working men they had returned to their work as fishermen in the thriving fishing industry on the shores of the sea of Galilee. In today's Gospel reading we heard how Jesus called four of them not just to believe in him but to become followers, disciples. These first four who were called to follow Jesus were self-employed fishermen.

Come and prepare for service in God's Kingdom.

I want to say something about how we can interpret a passage in the Bible. I have heard this passage from Mark expounded as if Jesus came on 4 strangers on the beach and then He called them out of the blue as by some force of personality. No, they already knew Jesus and had heard John the Baptist's testimony about him. Don't interpret a Bible Passage in a way that contradicts another.

We read "**They left the nets and followed Jesus**". We shouldn't interpret that as requiring all Christians to abandon their careers and live by faith. Theirs was a special call at that time. We also know that after the resurrection when the Apostles returned to Galilee Peter was able to say to his friends, "**I'm going out fishing**" and the others joined him [John 21:3]. It is important not to over interpret but to see bible passages in relation to the rest of scripture.

There were many others who followed Jesus and came to learn from Jesus. Eventually Jesus chose 12 of them to be sent out as **Apostles** to go out and preach

the message of the Kingdom of Heaven and to heal. Jesus gave most of his time with that small group. They learned on the job by working with Jesus. For the first 300 years the church met in homes, or rented halls. Those small congregations were strong fellowships who knew and cared for each other. They supported one another through trials and persecutions.

There is a widespread desire to recapture the heart and spirit of the early church. Much of the training a Jewish Rabbi like Jesus would give to his disciples would be by example, by living together and asking and answering questions about life and God's word.

St Paul taught that the whole Body of Christ, all the members are given Gifts so that, as each part does its work, the whole body is built up and grows to maturity [Ephesians 4:1-7,11-13].

We are all meant to be involved and using our gifts to build up the body of Christ.

Jesus did not just want people to become superficial adherents or believers but wholehearted Disciples who would daily follow Him [Matthew 16:21-28].

TESTEMONY - DIVYA

If we think of the ways the NT encourages us to relate to one another it is clear that many of them are most easily achieved in a face to face or small group setting.

Paul writes to the Roman Christians [12:10, 15:7]

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love...

Accept one another." The Good Lord accepts us despite our obvious failings and We should accept one another despite the things that separate us.

And to the Ephesians [4:32] Paul writes

**"Be kind and compassionate to one another,
forgiving each other
just as in Christ God forgave you."**

And to the Galatian [6:2] Christians

"Carry one another's burdens"

He is speaking of practical help for one another in hard times.

The writer to the [Hebrews 3:13, 10:24] knew what would build up the church. He says,

"Encourage one another daily...."

**Let us consider how we may spur one another on
towards love and good deeds."**

Words of praise and encouragement achieve more than words of criticism.

In small groups we can actively encourage and support one another in our walk with God.

In face to face groups we can help one another with the daily challenges of living a holy life in the face of temptation, doubt and failure.

We need face to face contact to live out this kind of fellowship. If we only meet in the context of the larger worship services it isn't easy to see how we can live out this kind of brotherly love.

Our cell groups can also be places where those who are not yet believers can explore the faith, clarify their thinking and meet with Jesus.

It is not our purpose to ram Christianity down anyone's throat but we are called to play our part in helping those who God is calling into His Kingdom to hear and receive the Good News of Jesus.

Jesus' met with the woman at the well and guided her to a true understanding of her place in the Kingdom of Heaven [John 4:1-26]. On the way into Jericho Jesus saw Zacchaeus' enquiring face and invited himself to eat in his home. He spoke words of blessing and brought joy to that home [Luke 19:1-27].

There are a lot of people with genuine spiritual awareness but who have not had a church background. They may find it much easier to belong to a small group and in that way to find their way to true faith in Christ. Having to adapt to a "churchy culture" in order to find out about the faith can be a serious barrier.

A church leader can only relate effectively to about 70 people in a congregation. Small groups play an important part in the life of the church in caring for the spiritual needs of church members and can be an easy **way in** for those who are interested in exploring the faith but not yet sure or committed.

I have benefitted such a lot from being a part of small study groups and I have always tried to foster and encourage them whenever possible.

One Advantage of SMALL GROUPS - FLEXIBILITY
We had a large Young Families Group Brilliant System for Men one week, Women next week on the third week they had a social together. It saved them having to find child minders for each meeting.

Each group is different and they to grow and flourish in unique ways which fit their member's needs. The chief dynamic in Home groups is to learn together in an atmosphere of Openness, Love, Caring, Mutual Help. In a Cell group members can feel safe enough to express doubts & fears and learn together how to work out faith in everyday life.

In a Cell group we find encouragement and Challenge, The opportunity to pray & to be prayed for.

Every group needs a leader or leaders but Cell Group leaders don't have to be trained teachers. There are resources and training which groups can benefit from.

The aim of Cell Groups is to learn together under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

A Cell group has a shared responsibility, it has a shared ambition to learn in depth from the Bible in the context of fellowship grounded in the everyday life of the group. It is the pattern Jesus himself used with the 12. When we are Free to express our Faith and empowered as the people of God we can grow in a living experience of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Living Lord, we thank you that your spirit is at work in our congregation through our worship together in Church, in our small groups, in our families and through our individual lives and witness. We pray for your continued leading and your blessing upon us. Amen